

THE
TWISTED
QUEEN

AMY BURNS

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For anyone that usually roots for the handsome villain.

List of Characters

(Just in case you forget who someone is. Don't worry – we've all been there.)

Catania 'Cat' Nightfallow – Queen of Crimone and the Main Character.

Jesperin 'Jesper' Ulara – Lord of Demorai Island. Morally Grey. Loves art but can only draw stick men.

Arka – a strangely tame wolf.

Eriel Swan – Count of Firen – Royal emissary and chief advisor to the Queen. Also, a dear friend.

Willen Swan – twin brother of Eriel. General of the royal army. Has a knighthood.

Riddel Cosma – close friend of Jesper's and his "left-hand".

Kalline Cosma – sister to Riddel and incredibly talented with a needle and thread (and her hands).

Posy Accora – lady-in-waiting to the Queen. Infectious smile.

Lord Augustus Josephite – Count of Pemdone – One of the opposing lords to Catania's rule. Definitely suspicious.

(The third) Lady Josephite – Countess of Pemdone – a young woman who can certainly do better.

Darlia Josephite – the eldest Josephite child. Cold and calculating, but pretty harmless.

Mirana Josephite – has all the characteristics of a forgotten middle-child.

Kalen Josephite – probably too young to be considered the heir to his father's estate and title.

Lord Constantine Olliea – Count of Thyne – The second of the opposing lords. Undeniably worse than the first.

Lady Olliea – Countess of Thyne – spoils her husband and son.

Eden Olliea – son of Lord Olliea and a complete asshole.

Sir Siwel Gates – wealthy knight who has an interest in everything Jesperin Utara does (could be his biggest fan).

Salacia Gates – wife of Sir Siwel and extremely familiar.

Lord Narim Halle – likes older women.

Baron Angelis – an opposer to Jesperin Utara's takeover of Demorai Island and a rubbish artist.

Mr and Mrs Flitle – terrible people.

Alisna and Jakob – adorable.

Serena Everenden – a beautiful emissary from the kingdom of Wertheria. Also, someone Eriel has a huge crush on.

Captain Silas Everenden – Serena's brother and the new captain of 'The Wailing Siren'.

Elizabetia Murcla – a thief who might have murdered King Firo I.

King Firo II Nightfallow – Catania's father.

Queen Melisa Nightfallow – Catania's mother.

Captain Utara – Jesperin's father and original captain of 'The Wailing Siren'.

Lorelai Riadane – the headmistress of the Wister Academy. Jesperin's aunt.

Laxia, Julen and Maylia – the three goddesses that are worshipped in Crimone.



Prologue



“Long live the Queen!”

“This will all be yours one day, Catania. The goddesses have chosen us to rule Crimone.”

The words echoed in my head as I stared down at the people of Crimone, their cheers drowned out by the memory.

Some of the people were wary of me – their faces screwed up in different forms of curiosity. Before my parents disappeared, no one had met me – *the princess*. I’d been hidden away for years.

The crown weighed heavy against my skull, the feeling foreign, as though it were never meant to be. I gripped a hold of the edge of the balcony and looked down my nose at those I was to rule over.

“Why will it all be mine, Your Majesty?” the girl in the memory asked, peering over the map that had been placed on the table before her.

The man chuckled, his hand coming to rest on the young child’s head. “Well, it is because you are my only daughter and heir to the throne of Crimone, my dearest one.”

A gentle hand rested on my shoulder, and my eyes drifted to the man standing beside me, a concerned look in his eyes. “Is everything alright, My Queen? You seem distracted.”

I raised my shoulder to remove his hold from it, watching his hand fall back to his side. “I’m perfectly fine, Eriel,” I spoke swiftly, the voice

sounding unlike my own.

The girl's face twisted in confusion, looking up at her father and tugging on his arm. "But what about Cate?"

"Do not ever mention that name, Catania. You will only upset your father," a woman replied sharply, moving to the girl's other side. "And you would not want to do that now, would you?"

I felt breathless, recalling the moment well now and the way it had made my insides shrivel up.

I could still see their gazes shift to the girl shoved in the corner of the room, a book in her hands.

Her knuckles turned white as she hoped they might ask her to join them – to be a part of the family she yearned to be accepted into.

If they could see me now, they would regret their treatment.

"Long live Queen Catania of Crimone!"

Chapter One



“Cat, you’ve barely said two words all day,” a man spoke gingerly as he slid some papers in front of me. The words on them were scribbled and small – already I had to squint in anticipation of reading over them. “I’m worried about you,” he pressed on.

Letting out a breath through my nose, I turned my chin up to look at the man speaking, he was the only one who was allowed to call me fondly. “Eriel, I told you at on the balcony I was fine. That has not changed in the last half an hour.”

His concern was touching but unwanted.

Eriel and I had grown up together, since the two of us were the same age. He was quite possibly the only person to know me better than I knew myself. I’d not had many friends – *and I still didn’t.*

“You’re the only person I know who would give up a chance of a celebration to come back to work,” Eriel grumbled, the man dropping elegantly into his seat on the opposite side of my desk. “Not to mention insisting I come with you.”

“I stated that you could stay if you wanted to,” I argued, rolling my eyes at his words. “You were the insistent one – if I recall, it was because you were trying to avoid explaining my absence. Even though it is your job to cover for me.”

He exhaled dramatically. “You certainly don’t pay me enough to deal with all the questions I would get.”

“I can stop paying you all together if you like. That nice estate you want by Naever will just have to wait,” I answered, impassively.

“Don’t bring my only happiness into this,” Eriel teased with a playful gasp.

We both went quiet. Eriel crossed his legs as he sat back in the wooden chair, his hands gripping the rests as he let his gaze rise to mine once more. “Are you really not going to talk to me about whatever it is that’s bothering you? Is it about the ball next week? I know you don’t want to find a husband, but I thought you understood the importance of it...”

I stared at him for a moment. His eyes, the colour of chestnuts, met my own – unwavering as he waited for my answer. I could understand why many thought Eriel was handsome.

He had a kind gaze and long eyelashes that anyone would be envious of. His rich brown hair was styled in perfect tight curls that reached just above his shoulders, and his skin was a dark bronze – almost golden in colour and one that many would wish to be blessed with. He was slender – but his body fit.

At one time, I’d found myself captivated by him. But that was before I knew my place – before I knew that I could never convey my feelings to him and had swiftly grown out of them. *I had no time for love or for romance.*

“Can you just give me the information like I asked you to? If I want you to counsel me on my personal life, I will ask,” I groaned. My fingers moved up to rub my temple, the other reaching to undo the sapphire brooch that kept the coronation cloak wrapped around my shoulders.

Eriel let out a heavy sigh, shifting in his seat as he became serious and leaned on the desk with his forearms. I noticed that he’d misplaced a golden cufflink, probably when he was rushing around at my command, as well as his forest green overcoat having some patches sewn in to mend the holes. Even the white ruffle shirt he wore beneath the long waistcoat was looking a little worse for wear, and whilst the man was clean shaven, I could not help but notice the bags beneath his eyes.

How had I not noticed he would need a new one? The last few weeks had been a blur – and I’d done nothing but care for myself.

I could not ponder my selfishness for too long as Eriel began to speak, and I started to read over the note he'd given me. "Wertheria asks that we continue to trade with them. The last two years since the coronation of King Valentine have been prosperous for both kingdoms."

"So, there is no problem if we do continue to trade then," I decided, not wanting to dwell on topics that did not need my attention.

"Well, actually, there have been some recent developments." Eriel cleared his throat and played with his collar – his nervous habit was something I'd come to notice over the years of our friendship. He nearly dislodged the emerald broach I'd gifted him on the news of my ascension and on his own rise to my chief advisor. "People on Demorai Island have started to intercept what we are trying to send to Wertheria."

Demorai Island was just south of Crimone. It was technically under the jurisdiction of the crown but was governed by a council.

"Which is a waste of money and resources," I mused, my attention on the paper instead of him. "Do we have a contact on the island?"

"No, the last contact was killed last year, and the kingdom has been trying to avoid anything to do with the island altogether since that," Eriel admitted, fidgeting in his seat – he must have been uncomfortable. "Your parents did not send anyone in case someone else was hurt."

I clicked my tongue in disapproval. "That was a mistake." *They made a lot of those, in my opinion.* "We've now had no eyes and ears there for a year which is most troubling. Have you gained any information from the port at least?" I could still hear the celebrations from below, as I'd instructed for the people to enjoy the festivities throughout the day – without my presence.

I was used to not attending. To being shut away with no invite – the sounds of music and laughter mocking me. It felt no different now, despite being in a position to do whatever I pleased.

"Well, there is *some* information. The island has been taken over by someone new. He removed the previous island council some months ago and has been ridding himself of anyone who stands in his way. The nobility that are left on the island have accepted him, though for how long – no one knows."

I raised an eyebrow at this, my curiosity piqued. "I see..." he sounded interesting, "does this man have a name?" I tapped my fingers on the desk, my nails slightly scratching the wood each time.

Embarrassment was beginning to fill me. I didn't know the first thing about ruling, and I was expected to come up with a solution, but I had to pretend I did.

Despite being shut in a room in the east tower for years, matters of state had never been something I was expected to learn.

Even so, I had poured myself over maps, histories of the kingdoms, and yet none of that seemed relevant now – not when it was no longer imaginary.

“I don't have his exact name, but they call him The Fox because he's–”

“Cunning?” I raised my hand to my chin, meeting his stare across the desk once again. His cheeks flushed as I stared at him, making my lips curl. I found it amusing that he felt intimidated by me at times. He admitted it to me once – when drunk. I now knew the signs.

Eriel continued, trying to veer away from his awkwardness, “Yes. It appears he is looking to become a ruler there in his own right rather than run it with a council that you, as the ruler, are meant to oversee from afar.”

The council not running Demorai Island would be disastrous.

Demorai Island had always been the largest trading point between the three kingdoms. The island council had been more than willing to allow the trade as it was how they made money, but if someone were trying to rule it on their own, they would want to be treated just as rulers of other kingdoms were. Which would mean trying to form their own alliances – and I had to make sure Crimone got there before anyone else did.

I pondered for a moment before speaking thoughtfully, “Invite him to the festivities next week.”

“You've got to be crazy, Cat.” Eriel's dark eyes widened, his hands coming to rest on the desk, trying to implore me. “You can't invite him here. The rumours about him say that he's power hungry, that he would kill anyone who stands in his way–”

“Then we should do our best not to get in his way.” I rolled my eyes and pushed some paper towards him and my quill for him to write an invitation. “If I do not invite him, he may see it as a snub and then it would be worse for Crimone. I will deal with the other kingdoms when the time comes.”

Eriel did not wipe the frown from his face and looked unconvinced as he began to jot down some words. He ignored my comment as he said, “Also, Wertheria have accepted your invitation to the festivities. King Valentine

sends his apologies, but he is unable to attend and is sending an emissary instead. Something about his daughter not sleeping through the night and causing quite the ruckus in the castle.”

“Sounds terrible,” I muttered. “An emissary, you say? Does it happen to be the beautiful Serena Everenden you are so besotted with?” I teased.

Eriel cleared his throat, the heat rising in his face, and I delighted in seeing him squirm. “I do not know what you speak of.”

Rising, I held onto the back of my chair, as I turned to stare at the map that had been pinned to the wall behind the desk. It spanned across the wall entirely, leaving no part uncovered, the kingdoms larger than me. I walked towards the right, stopping when I reached the kingdom there. “Oh well, be boring and don’t tell me about your little crush. What of Dalvesta?”

“Likewise, the kingdom will send an emissary – at least that avoids the King and Queen bringing their horrendously behaved daughters.”

The words themselves filled me with a sense of relief.

I grimaced as I remembered the stories of the Dalvestan royal family. My cousins – the Silverens. “I wish you wouldn’t mention them. The letter the oldest girl sent to me last week was enough to scar me for life.”

Eriel gave a sympathetic look as he raised his head for a moment. “They can be very cruel, from what I’ve heard. At least the rumours claim all but the youngest is – I wonder how the King and Queen cope. Perhaps the rumours are true, and it involves copious amounts of alcohol and sweet obliviousness.”

When I nodded my agreement, the two of us fell into an easy silence, and the only sound was the slight scratching of the quill on paper as he wrote the letter.

My head turned as I examined the room. It was a large chamber with pointless amounts of furnishings. A fine vase here and a golden chandelier there. My eyes settled on the fire that burned to one side, the flames crackling against the kindling. Slowly, I pulled my gaze up to the portrait that rested above the mantle.

The figures were regal, cloaked in golds and silvers, with the familiar Crimonian blue lining their clothes. Their eyes were stony, full of a desire for something, though the painter would not have been able to conceive what. It was one of many portraits to exist – but it was the one that felt the

most real. Perhaps the painter *had* known what they were doing – the cruel cravings behind their majestic appearances.

“Cat?”

My trail of thought was broken as I snapped back to Eriel, who held the envelope in his hand.

He continued hesitantly, “I’m going to go and have this sent off... are you sure?”

“I have never been more so,” I replied a little too quickly. He did not seem convinced by my answer but rose from his seat.

He turned himself away. “I will come and find you later.”

“Go and enjoy yourself, Eriel,” I muttered, rubbing my aching temples. “I want to be alone.”

He wouldn’t argue again, closing the door on his way out of the room.

Once he was gone, I crouched down to unlace my boots and kick them off. Letting out a sigh of relief, I undid the buttons of my collar, releasing my neck from its confinement, and finished unbuttoning the garment all the way down until I could remove the thing entirely. Which left me in my trousers and a thin black undershirt.

I lay back in my seat – closing my eyes as I tried to block out the sounds from below.

Crimone was my home, and yet I’d never felt as though I belonged there, let alone on their throne – ruling the people.

The burden of a kingdom was a heavy one, and where it had thrived under King Firo II and Queen Melisa, I had a fear that I would ruin it.

This was not the life I wanted for myself. The riches I’d once craved were no longer exciting to me.

I wanted excitement.

And yet, I would not let that thought consume me. I would give myself the evening – give the people their chance to celebrate.

Before I would have to fully embrace my new position.

Chapter Two



A week had passed since the coronation, and my days were filled with council meetings and questions about the ball I was hosting to find a consort.

Well, that was what I was disguising the event as, anyway.

The ball, in my opinion, was necessary since I needed a chance to assess who I must be wary of.

It was common knowledge to anyone in Crimone (and the other kingdoms) that The Fourth Kingdom was beginning to pose a threat – although what the threat was everyone was unsure of. Yet, the biggest threat could be those in the royal courts.

There was also my curiosity at finding out who the mysterious man was that would be attending from Demorai Island.

The Fox had proven just as elusive as his name suggested. I'd found out very little about him since Eriel had informed me of his takeover of the island.

Eventually, after Eriel's continuous nagging, I decided on a costumed ball – choosing to break tradition from the usual repetitive affairs my parents had held.

A small smile graced my face as I looked at myself in the mirror – impressed by my own creation.

“If they could see me now, they would be quite horrified,” I muttered softly to myself, hands on my hips as I admired the outfit on my form.

I’d chosen quite the controversial figure to become that night. Elizabetia Murcla was a famous female hunter and was supposedly the person responsible for the murder of my grandfather – King Firo I of Crimone.

However, nothing had been proven and there were stories of Elizabetia stealing from the king to feed the poor – she was practically a saint to many people in the kingdom.

The leather trousers fit perfectly against my skin, complimenting every curve of my frame. I had never worn something so tight-fitting, yet it made me quite exhilarated. The shirt clung to my body, the colour a deep red, much like the blood she *might* have spilt. Only the brown cape clipped to my shoulders was flowy.

My eyes had been lined with black kohl and dusted with red powder. There was a quiver of arrows on my back with a black painted bow – her signature weapon. I placed a pointed hat upon my head to complete the look, turning when there was a knock at the door.

I like to think my parents would have scolded me for such an ‘outrageous’ outfit. But they were not here now.

Not that they would have cared enough to comment on it even if they were.

“You are running quite late, My Queen!” Eriel impatiently called.

I smirked as I moved to the door and opened it with the one that did not hold my bow. “I have been told a monarch cannot be late to their own celebrations.”

“Who told you that?”

“Alright, you caught me. *I tell myself that.*”

Eriel chuckled warmly, his eyes shining through the beautiful black mask that was covering the top of his face. I did not bother to hide my laugh as I noticed the horns he had on his head, poking through a navy-blue pirate hat, their curl reminding me of a ram. The hat had holes poked in certain places to make it look worn and a few rogue feathers pointing out of it.

“And what are you supposed to be, dear friend?” I said, feigning ignorance, as the two of us began to walk from my chambers. I hooked my

bow under my arm and pulled on the burgundy leather gloves I'd grabbed from my desk on the way out.

I could have sworn the grown man pouted at my words before he spoke confidently, "I'm obviously the famous rogue pirate – Captain Utara."

Captain Utara was quite the notary figure. A mutated demon, roaming the seas and attacking the ships of the unknown inhabitants of The Fourth Kingdom. He only died a few years previous.

Despite Captain Utara's good deeds, he was still a pirate, stealing from others and living an 'immoral' life. However, most people were still curious, and rumours and stories were told about him. Some even profited from writing them down.

Mutated demons were different from those who lived among humans for years. In the last fifty or so years, a few humans had been taking demons and testing on them to discover the scientific reasons they were different from us – or that was what the rumours had spread were saying.

I believed that they were doing it for a different reason – but I had no proof. *Just a pointless feeling.*

The mutations started innocently according to my father. But as the years went on, they started to inject them with a venom that mixed with the magic that made them demons. Demons, from what had been written about them, were descended from *old magic*.

Another thing I knew very little about.

Humans were rarely taught much about demons, other than they are not much different from us. They live among us, just as we do them, and aside from their fast movements and bright features (their hair, their eyes) – they were no different to us.

But perhaps there were far more magical practitioners than we could imagine in the world and *old magic* was something we should be more aware of.

I snorted incredulously as I thought of this, raising a hand to pat Eriel's shoulder, the shimmering material of his black overcoat glistening in the candlelight as we walked down the stairs. "I approve of your choice. It suits your adventurous nature."

"You're teasing me." Eriel narrowed his eyes as he nudged his arm against my own. The man hated travelling by boat. He complained every time he was sent as an emissary of the kingdom – which was quite often.

"Yes, Eriel, teasing you is one of my only joys in life."

“By the goddesses, you must be more miserable than I thought,” Eriel gasped, teasingly.

Choosing to ignore him, I replied, “How many have gathered this evening? Are they in costume, as I requested?”

“There are some who complained about your request.” The man frowned, playing with the sword strapped to his belt. “Including the Counts of Thyne and Pemdane.”

“Oh, my favourite men – Olliea and Josephite,” I drawled.

The lords were my biggest opposers when it came to my coronation. They had been unhappy to be led by a female ruler and they made their displeasure known throughout the kingdom, spreading rumours and obscenities about me.

So many rumours to keep up with, aren't there? Pity it's not easy to tell which ones are the truth.

Nevertheless, the lords still wanted me to wed one of their children. They knew that to gain more power, they must play a waiting game.

At the reminder of their blatant disobedience, I smirked – playing with their emotions had become quite the entertainment for me.

Eriel paused to speak to the guards at the door, to ready them for my arrival.

I noticed a shadow looming behind us and turned, catching the wrist of the figure before he could tap my shoulder. He withdrew his hand as though my touch had burned him, and his eyes widened with astonishment as he stared at me, reminding me of Eriel.

The two were twins, after all.

“I’ve told you not to sneak up on the Queen, Willen,” Eriel scolded the man.

At a first glance, the only difference between the twins physically was that Willen had lighter hair than Eriel.

But since I’d known them both for years, it was *easy* to see the little differences.

Willen’s bigger nose, the pointier ears, the slight difference in height – with Willen being just shorter and choosing to sport his stubble, where Eriel was always clean shaven.

Not to mention the little birthmark below Eriel’s right ear. Willen was a pleasant man, shy where his brother was confident. He was a man dedicated to the crown – that was for certain. His skin was slightly

darkened by the sun in comparison to his brother from all his days spent training to become a member of the guard under my father and now the leader of mine.

“Sorry, Your Majesty. I forgot myself for a moment,” Willen apologised, bowing his head regretfully after tearing his eyes away from my face.

I let myself smile. He was a genuine man, though I had not found our friendship to be as strong. Whilst I knew he was trustworthy, I kept him at arm’s length in contrast to his brother.

“Nonsense, Will. Ignore Eriel. You’re as much my friend as he is.” A *harmless lie couldn’t hurt anyone*. “How was your journey to Dalvesta? Did you get a chance to speak to the royal family?”

Acting as my representative since his brother was needed here, Willen usually took on the excess of jobs that Eriel could not handle alone – *or the ones he didn’t want to do*.

Willen became proficient, nodding at the question. “Yes, Your Majesty. They both send their respects – their emissary should already be inside. I believe he is dressed in the colours of a peacock if you wish to speak to him.”

“What about their youngest daughter, does she send her respects too?” Eriel pestered, fixing the golden hoop earring he wore, ignoring the glare that Willen shot his way.

The shorter twin cleared his throat, rubbing his hand over the hilt of his sword. “The Princess Romilly made my stay... pleasant.”

Eriel and I shared a knowing look, the two of us unable to hide our smirks. To avoid upsetting Willen, I changed the subject.

“Your outfit is...” I started but didn’t finish, as I couldn’t find anything nice to say about the predictable choice of clothes.

Eriel patted the man on the back, a playful smile on his lips. “What are you dressed as though, brother? A... guard?”

“No! I’m Sir Nicourt, the famous knight who killed the evil sorcerer Norag of the olden times.” Willen frowned, grumbling about how his brother had not remembered his idol.

“That’s rather tedious, brother. You’re a guard every day. Could you not have picked someone more exciting?” Eriel tutted, shaking his head.

The coin dropped, and Willen’s tantrum began – I had seen it happen a countless number of times.

How very boring of them.

Willen's deep-set eyes narrowed. His slim nose scrunching in disapproval. "And you are always a rogue. Could you not have picked something else?"

"Why, you little... you should learn some respect for your older brother..." Eriel caught the man in a headlock, but he stood no chance against his warrior brother, who quickly twisted Eriel's arm behind his back. Eriel yelped, his hand going to the hilt of his sword – he was the stronger swordsman of the two, after all.

Willen let out a hearty chuckle. "You are only a couple of minutes older than me, brother. Perhaps you should have dressed as a dog since that is what everyone calls you."

"I know what they call me, and I would prefer not to be reminded, you scoundrel!"

It was a rare moment when the two of them would act like children again. They were both so dedicated to their roles, they had very little time to enjoy themselves.

"Let us head inside, gentlemen." I rolled my eyes, gesturing for them to follow me. Their little fight could wait; I had important matters to attend to.

Also, I wanted everyone to admire my outfit.

The doors were thrown open, and a cane stamped on the floor with three thuds, causing a hush to wash over the room. All eyes pointed in my direction, and it set my stomach into an excited flutter.

I may not want to be royal, but I most certainly like the attention.

"Her Majesty, Queen Catania, Lord Eriel Swan, the Count of Firen and Sir Swan."

I could hear the mutters – the horrified comments mixed with the awe as I stepped inside. I was pleased to see so many had donned costumes, the room full of colourful fabrics, masks, hats, wigs, and accessories galore. It felt like a childish dream to have wanted a costume party, and it sent a thrill through me.

"There they are, Cat." Eriel pointed out the men we had been speaking of before, the two of them wore their usual out-of-style short overcoats and frilled shirts, both leaning on a cane with the head of their family symbol atop. It made me glance at my own family symbol that decorated the hanging flags about the room.

The Nightfallow family had ruled Crimone for centuries, and our symbol was of a moon and two stars.

I looked up at the four large chandeliers that hung on the high ceiling of the white and rounded room. The ballroom was always light, no matter the time of day, and was surrounded with tall windows. The grey and blue marbled floor had been polished and I liked the way it glistened. The place looked clean and stylish – something I could be proud of.

As we walked closer to the aforementioned lords, the two of them whispering to one another, I could almost see the steam coming out of the Lords' ears as they watched me.

"You told me they had not dressed in costume, my lord! From what I can see, they make very good jesters," I spoke, loud enough for the men to hear as we passed by them.

"Why you—" I heard a growl from my side, but kept my stare firmly ahead, feeling smug.

Eriel smirked, leaning his head closer to mine to mutter mischievously, "It would be better if you had told them that to their faces."

"What, and ruin the reputation of the crown?" I grinned, and I could feel their gazes burning into the side of my face. "One day I will gain the courage to say just what I think of them."

Being careful not to trip on my lengthy cape, I stepped up onto the dais and turned to my subjects, my hands raised to either side of me. It was a bold gesture – something I had seen my father do when he wanted to gather attention (*only viewed from the shadows, of course*).

"I welcome you all tonight, and thank you for your attendance," I started, the room staying quiet as I spoke. It was strange to have a room under my command and to have the attention all on me. It also felt exhilarating.

My heart thumped in my chest, but I continued to plaster a smile onto my rouged lips. "I would ask that you drink your fill, dance, and enjoy yourselves on this special day." I took a goblet of wine that was raised to me by a servant and raised my hand in the air. Eriel took note and did the same.

"To the Queen!" Eriel announced forcefully, his eyes sparkling in the light of the chandeliers.

"The Queen!" an enthusiastic chorus erupted in the room as people raised their glasses. Some were more reluctant than others, but I had

already taken note of their faces, making it my business to learn their names.

Taking a gulp of my drink, I forced a smile at the bitter taste, wiping my mouth with the back of my gloved hand – the leather cool against my lips. I was aware of how undignified the action might have looked, but I cared little and moved to take a seat on my throne.

My throne.

The words were odd to think about, as I had always admired the grand chair that my father sat on. I held the arm rests, my fingers wrapped around the gold ends, crossing one leg over the other. I could feel the disapproving stares at my attire, though I was not sure whether it was the fact that the queen had donned leather trousers for the second time in a week or of my choice of character.

I watched with insincere interest as one of the lords took the chance to approach me, his son dragged along at his side.

“You look quite the part, Your Majesty. I have yet to offer you my condolences on the disappearance of your parents.”

Ah, yes. Their disappearance. Something I did not want to dwell on that evening. I had forgotten to look concerned about the topic.

“I am grateful for your kind words, Lord Olliea.” I did not mean for the sentence to come out as flat as it did. I could see his dark eye twitch in anger behind his monocle, and I raised an eyebrow to see if he would try to challenge me.

And he did. How predictable. Men usually are.

“It does not sound as though you are.” Lord Olliea glared, his hands curling into fists at his sides. He was shaking with fury, and I wondered if the little amount of blond hair he had left would turn grey from stress.

Lord Olliea spat out his words, “No matter, I have come to ask if you would permit my son to ask you for the first dance, Your Majesty.”

It did not sound as though he were asking me – more informing me I had little choice in the matter.

His son, Eden Olliea, was not a boy. He was the mirror image of his father – who would have been considered quite handsome in his prime. Eden was of average height, with short blond hair and dark brown eyes, a light stubble ghosting his chin – and yet...

He was just as ugly inside as his father was. To think they could believe I might consider him a candidate for my hand was absurd.

I often observed the elite families growing up – from my hiding places. They never saw the royal heir, and it would explain their uneasy attitude around me now that I was their ruler.

“Can he not ask me himself?” The response had fallen from my lips with ease, and I knew it would only continue to rile the man. His face was turning red, and he let out a huff through his nose. “I rather thought your son his own man by now, being five and twenty.”

I had caused embarrassment to the two of them. I was determined to offend them that evening in front of everyone. If they wanted to oppose their ruler so openly, I would make them regret it.

Eden stepped forward, raising a finger in my direction, which caused my lips to twitch in amusement. He glared, his nostrils flaring. “I will not have you speak to my father in such a way–”

“Oh hush. Run back to your mother, boy,” I spat out the words, sitting forward a little. “And remember whom you address.”

Eden tried to pull free of his father, whose hand had wrapped around his arm. Lord Olliea was trying to pull him away from the dais, to avoid any more conversation with me.

But, much to his father’s dismay, Eden could not keep his big mouth shut. “I know whom I address, and she is a fraud, a woman trying to be a man! Just look at you, you’re disgusting!”

Eriel was standing close by, his hand gripping the hilt of his sword, ready to jump to my aid if he needed to. Some people had stopped dancing, and tried to listen in on what was being said.

I was more than happy to give them a show.

“I’ve been told the women in Wertheria often wear trousers. But I must have been mistaken as I thought Crimone was a forward-thinking kingdom,” I reflected calmly, before my eyes flittered across to where I spotted the perfect support. “Ah, Lady Serena, how wonderful it is to see you again. Could you enlighten the gentlemen here about the customs of Wertheria? I feel they have become very hard-headed in these past few weeks and could do with some insight.”

The elegant woman turned, her dark chocolate-brown curls pinned beautifully atop her head, with pearl pins throughout. For her costume, she wore a white flowing gown, the silk fabric draped over her, cascading beautifully behind in a train. Golden bangles could be heard clinking when she moved her wrists. She had chosen to attend as one of Crimone’s three

goddesses – Maylia. She wore a beautiful shimmer over her brown skin, creating the idea that she was sparkling.

Serena's kind violet eyes met my own, and she bowed respectfully, to which I returned with a nod. "Of course, Your Majesty, come gentleman." She grinned; her smile was as enchanting as she was.

Serena Everenden had visited a few times since the reign of King Valentine, often coming as his emissary. Eriel had taken quite a shine to her, unable to hide his grin when she would engage in conversation with him. I glanced to my side, to see him shifting eagerly again, and it made me smirk.

"And, Lord Swan, perhaps you would also care to keep an eye on them for me," I muttered lightly, for only his ears.

"I'd be delighted," Eriel replied eagerly and without hesitation.

"Of course you would." I chuckled to myself as I watched the man move to join the group, and I could have sworn I saw Serena's cheeks go rosy, her shoulders relaxing as Eriel stood at her side.

"You seem in good spirits this evening, Your Majesty. Might I request your first dance?"

I dragged my eyes away from the scene, my eyes landing on the top of someone's head. It was the son of Lord Josephite, Kalen, a boy who had barely a hair on his chest at the age of seventeen.

It was a bold choice for Lord Josephite to pressure his son into speaking to me so directly. The boy looked terrified when he rose up to his full height, quickly looking back down in fear I might bite his head off.

My reputation was not a positive one, but I did not want the lords to believe they had any claim over me or what I chose to do. I decided to entertain their attempt to rise to power – they just did not have a chance of *actually* gaining power over *me*.

I jumped at the chance to offend them again. "I am afraid I will have to decline, for you see my first dance is promised to another." I clicked my tongue and rose from the throne. My eyes swept about the room as I stepped down from the dais, before I stopped in front of Lord Josephite's daughter and extended my hand to her.

The woman was surprised, her eyebrows raised behind the white fan she had close to her face. She was closer to my age, and it felt more fitting for me to dance with her.

Mirana Josephite had flowing mousy-brown hair, which was wound into curls on top of her head, so it resembled the popular powdered wigs – but it did not suit her. The bright feathers shooting out of her hair did nothing to make her stand out either.

My nose scrunched up in distaste as I continued to observe her attire. Her frilly gown was a bright coral colour, and it looked a little big on her, likely a hand-me-down from her older sister. It was out of style, littered with gaudy orange bows and flowers. Many considered the girl plain. I certainly did, yet there was something oddly charming about her shy nature and glassy grey eyes.

“Lady Mirana, would you care to dance?” I asked resolutely – not expecting her to reject the offer.

The shock on their faces was priceless. However, Mirana’s pale cheeks turned ruddy when she lowered her fan, and she placed her smooth fingers against my own. “I – It would be an honour,” she stuttered, moving before her portly father could reach out for her arm.

“You are making a grave error, Your Majesty,” Lord Josephite spat out, but I knew he was all bark and no bite, his young wife holding onto his shoulder to prevent him from stepping forward.

“You are clearly mistaken. I do not make errors, Lord Josephite.” I kept my face composed, despite the thrill I felt inside, as I guided the woman to the dance floor and twirled her into my arms. She was smaller than me, her hand resting on my shoulder as I placed my hand on her dainty waist.

I jerked my head in the direction of the orchestra in the corner, the song changing to something more appropriate for a waltz. Pride filled me as I watched the fury grow from the males I had offended; their sons’ faces mirroring their fathers’ – which made me more certain of my choice.

“You look lovely tonight, Majesty,” Mirana complimented agreeably, letting me guide her in the dance. I’d been given a dance teacher in the later years of my life when my parents thought it would be useful. *I, of course, flourished under his care.*

I did my best not to wince when she stepped on my toes. I was a talented dancer, and it was painful to dance with someone who did not match my ability.

“Do I not always?”

Her cheeks flushed at my unabashed vanity, and she nodded quickly to cover her mistake. “Well, of course. You are the most beautiful woman in

the kingdom.”

“Oh, I am well aware of that.” I smirked, letting her fuel my ego. I was not looking at her as she continued to quietly mumble something about my attire. My eyes cast about the room in search of someone – The Fox to be precise. I could not forget about the mysterious man Eriel had described to me the week before.

“Are you looking for someone?” Mirana asked, making me glance back at her.

I managed the smallest of smiles, shaking my head. “No, just admiring those who dressed up this evening. The costumes are quite magnificent.” It was a dig at her family, but I wondered if I could use the opportunity to find out if her father had told her anything of his plans.

Everything happens behind closed doors, after all – and faster than many may think. I had to keep on top of things.

Using people to my advantage was something I was good at. Aside from Eriel, people meant little to me. I did not like being around them.

Not exactly ideal for the monarch of a kingdom.

Mirana’s shoulders became tense, and I noticed her look away, trying to find her family. I twirled her under my arm and pulled her back against me, my hand pressed firmly against her lower back. “You are hiding something from me, My Lady.”

“I... I would not wish to keep things from you, Your Majesty, but I am also worried about getting my family into trouble,” she replied uneasily, her eyes glued to something over my shoulder. Most likely her disapproving father.

“You need not worry about such things, Mirana. You can trust that your family will be safe no matter what you tell me,” I lied, finding it came easily to me. I squeezed her hand as we danced around the marbled floor, her toes often stamping on mine, making them throb.

A curl of her hair fell onto her cheek where we moved about so much, and she let go of my shoulder to tuck it behind her ear, her fingers shaking a little.

I felt *slightly* guilty about making the woman so nervous, but what she knew would be useful to me.

“My father hopes that you will marry my brother,” Mirana eventually muttered.

“Go on, Mirana.”

“Well, I overheard him and the Lord Olliea conversing last night in our family home—”

“The one just by north of Henvale Castle, am I right?”

Of course, I was – I wouldn’t have said it if I wasn’t certain.

“Yes. The Olliea family came for dinner,” she explained and let me dip her for a moment, our lips close to brushing. She gasped softly, and I watched her cheeks go a deep shade of red. With a sharp tug on her arm, I pulled us up quickly.

Too much teasing would result in me gaining nothing.

“And?” I pushed for her to continue, as if nothing had happened.

“They were talking about a plan to have you marry one of their sons, in the hope that you will make him king. Through their son, they would gain power and be able to have your own diminished.”

A foreseeable move. This was all information I had already guessed.

However, now the girl was talking, she would not stop. Her pale eyes darted about the room. “And, they started to fight of course. They could not decide which man to put up to the task. My brother is far too young to be involved, but father was insistent, and Olliea’s son is...”

I scoffed in irritation. “Quite like his father?”

“Indeed, so, Majesty. Well, once they had left abruptly after the fight, my father spoke of consulting...” she lowered her voice, a pair of dancers gliding past us, “someone from Demorai Island.”

Now, this was information. “Do you know who?”

“Father mentioned someone. I think he said ‘The Fox’ was his name? Apparently, he revealed a secret of yours to my father.”

What secrets did this Fox know about me, and what had he been offered to give up his information willingly?

“Are you aware of what this secret is?” I asked her, my voice darker. I could see the fear in her eyes, the way her body stiffened, and her hand loosened in mine. I had overstepped, and the poor girl was panicking.

She shook her head quickly, her bottom lip trembling.

“I understand. Thank you for the dance, Lady Mirana,” I coolly spoke, letting go of her instantly and bowing my head, putting some distance between us.

The girl curtsied and instantly rushed away from me, her head bent down as her father reached for her, already asking questions. There was

something off-putting about her stare, the way she blankly looked at her feet, hands in fists at her sides.

I walked through the graceful couples, glad to see that Eriel was alone once more. I wanted to borrow him to throw the information I'd just learnt in his direction and for him to make sense of with me.

However, I stopped abruptly when the doors swung open, and the chandeliers shook above my head. I was standing in the centre of the dance floor, and my hands fell to my sides.

A man and his entourage stepped through the doors. He observed the room briefly, before a charming smile broke out onto his face.

“Oh, am I late?”

Chapter Three



He was a demon. It was easy to tell with the hypnotic golden eyes that landed on mine as soon as he entered. The man had a presence about him, his frame large and muscular, and he towered over everyone in the room. The white cape he was wearing allowed for his garnet-coloured hair to be illuminated, the spikey style of his hair flicking out against his neck – just below his ear.

What was more striking were the silvery strands of his bangs that hung against his beautifully pale skin. His eyes were narrow, and he had lined them with kohl. Mostly, I stared at the mysterious black mark that swirled beneath his left eye.

He was stunning.

I felt as though he could see right beneath my clothes as his eyes stayed firmly on me, his mouth still pulled into a thin smile.

He lifted his arm with a flourish so that his white cloak flew behind him, and he bowed with a hand on his heart. “Your Majesty. I apologise for my tardiness. Might I say that you look radiant this evening?”

“I thank you, but who are you, sir?” I asked, holding my hands behind my back in an effort to look nonchalant. I could feel my heart pounding in my chest as he took a step closer, the room falling into silence. The thud of my heartbeat reached my ears, but I tried to focus, not wanting to let my immediate attraction to the man known.

He could be a threat to me. I kept that thought repeating in my mind.

“My name is Jesperin Utara, Your Highness. I am the Lord of Demorai Island.” The man smirked, and I watched his long, elegant fingers grip a hold of his cane tighter. It was similar to what the lords had been sporting that evening. Instead, the top was the shape of a fox. His hand was large as it covered the entire fox before I had a chance to take a proper look at it.

I felt a sharp jolt rush up my spine, making me shiver. *The Fox* stood in my presence. Even though I had invited him, I’d not believed he would show up, and I was left unprepared.

But I also realised his name sounded familiar.

“I must say, I am surprised you extended your invite to me, Majesty. Nonetheless, I am flattered you have acknowledged my new rule,” Jesperin drawled tantalizingly, stepping forward, the space between us quickly diminishing. I had to raise my chin as he got closer, the man standing at least a head and shoulders above me.

Biting my tongue, I thought of how to respond. I was aware of what my invite might have made him assume. I cursed myself internally for not having been more thorough in my opinions before sending it.

He now assumed I’d support his rule of the island.

“You are most welcome, Lord Utara,” I begrudgingly got out – his arrogant stance quite frustrating to me. He leaned lazily against his cane, his hip to one side.

“I sense some disdain in your tone.”

I was shocked he had called me out on it in front of everyone. Even the lords attempted not to. This man did not have any worries, however.

He continued playfully, “Have I overstepped?”

The mischievous attitude irked me further, for he knew he was grinding me down so that I’d have to reply to him.

“I apologise again, please, continue your evening all,” he addressed these words to the crowd. With a short nod of my head, the orchestra started to play again. The prying eyes were not quick to stop staring at the scene.

Jesperin’s pink lips curled into a smile, and he twirled his cane in his hand. “How about a dance, Your majestic Majesty?”

I focused my eyes on him as he extended his hand with a flourish. Rings twinkled on his fingers, some encrusted with various jewels, another with

strange symbols that I could not quite make out. “How about we take a walk onto the balcony, Lord Ulara? I am in need of the air and–”

“And a moment alone with me? Queen Catania, we have only just met!” He still offered his hand to me, and I waited to see if he would take it back.

“Hush, sir.” I waved my hand to silence him. My cheeks had flushed at his unabashed comment, but to avoid any more embarrassment, I gracefully moved to his side and linked my arm through his. I could feel his bicep beneath my hand and tried to ignore the heat that ran through my body at the proximity.

It was then that I could see his face better, as he tilted his chin down to me, his high cheekbones making him look sharp.

“You are quite handsome, Lord Ulara,” I told him before he could comment on my stare. My words were the truth, even if his personality was similar to that of a snake – his charming ways had a venom beneath them.

Is that what you’re telling yourself, Cat?

“Very kind of you to say so. I had wondered why you could not take your eyes off of me ever since I entered.”

The arrogance of the man was grating on me by the second.

“I am merely stating a fact. You have been blessed by your parents with your looks, I can only assume.” I noticed the strange marking below his left eye, which originally I had thought had been drawn on with make-up, but it looked as though the number two was carved into his skin with black ink.

I wondered if it was permanent, but I knew I could not ask him what it was. Perhaps it had something to do with his demon genes.

You can’t just ask someone about their genes.

Demons had the ability to move faster, had a higher body temperature and usually were born with defining bright eyes that made them different to humans. This explained the golden irises that were glued to the side of my head as I looked back towards our destination.

“I am much like my father, I have been told, but I only listen when I am being complimented.” He sniggered, his cane tapping on the floor.

Jesperin was clearly an entertainer. He knew people were staring at him, and he played right into their hands, giving them something to look at.

I hated it.

“A bold choice of outfit, Majesty. Elizabetia Murcla was quite the controversial woman,” Jesperin noted, our strides matching as he caught up with me after falling behind when talking about himself.

I shrugged, easily replying, “The nobility of this kingdom despised her; this is my way of rebelling.”

“A strange idea, but an admirable one,” he commented, the compliment surprising me and warming my body in a way no other had been able to. I must have been desperate for affection to think of him in such a way.

Once we were on the balcony, the doors closed behind us at my request, and I leaned my back against the white railing. My eyes trailed up above the door for a moment, to one of the many glass windows that looked into the ballroom. The white stone surrounding seemed too clean. The preparations for the event had clearly been more extensive than I’d imagined – something Eriel would have been behind.

“Care to explain your boldness in asking me out here with you, Majesty?” Jesperin started and moved to stand in front of me. My line of sight was obstructed by his form as the man loomed over me.

I didn’t straighten up, not wanting him to think he could intimidate me with such a tactic.

“What have you come dressed as?” I asked, not answering his question, my eyes narrowing as I examined the flamboyant costume the man had picked.

“The love demon, Eran.” The red-haired male leaned his head down, his eyes twinkling. “Ever heard of him?”

“Of course.” *I hated not knowing things.* His choice had left me with a gap in my knowledge and made me vulnerable to him. Even though it was something simple, it provoked me.

Jesperin tutted, and he moved so the tips of his black lace-up boots were almost brushing against mine. I could tell he was enjoying himself. The smirk on his face illuminated in the moonlight. “Well, as a reminder for you, Eran is said to have lured many a human to their deaths in old myths.”

Ignoring the way my heart thumped in my chest, I folded my arms. “And how is he said to have done that? With the brightness of his cloak?”

“Spiteful words, Your Majesty.” He chuckled low, and the sound was quite melodic. “No, he did so by making them believe he was in love with

them. They then made a deal with him, similar to a demon oath, and then they died since the love demon was cursed to never truly fall in love.”

“What a strange character to pick for the events tonight. You do know this is a ball for me to find a marriage partner? Maybe you are trying to curse me, instead.” My humour was gloomy at the best of times. Even I could not tell if I was teasing him or being serious.

The man spread the white cloak out with his hand, the black overcoat and shirt beneath looking odd against it. It conveyed exactly what he wanted it to. The love demon must have been approachable and handsome to those he lured in and dark when they found out his true nature inside.

Jesperin answered, “Or perhaps I am trying to seduce you into accepting an offer of marriage from myself?”

“You?” I snorted rudely, unable to stop the sound from leaving my lips, a habit I had not managed to get under control. “Why would I accept an offer from you, Jesperin Ulara?” I was already on a roll, his name falling from my tongue with ease as I let myself speak my mind. “You’re a man who has taken over Demorai Island without the support of the original council and caused chaos there. You destroy my ships, as well as those belonging to other kingdoms, and I know very little about you and what you are capable of aside from these things—”

He let out a roar of laughter that cut off my words, his large hands moving to grip the rail on either side of my frame, trapping me against it. I could feel his cane against my leg, where he still somehow managed to grasp it with his thumb and finger. I stared for a moment, eyes flickering to where his boots were and spotted the handle of a small dagger pointing out.

“I think you are just listing reasons why you *should* accept.” Jesperin bowed his head, so our faces were level. His hot breath fanned across my skin, and I pressed my leather-clad thighs close together. I trailed my gaze back up to his. His words were smooth, just like any good rogue, “Just think of what a perfect pair the two of us could make, Queenie.”

I gulped, my knees wanting to buckle at the way he was staring at me, but my head was telling me to keep in place. It was frustrating to feel so uneasy and so attracted to the man all at the same time. It was not a feeling I was familiar with.

My mental battle left him waiting for an answer. Eventually, I snapped crossly, “You’re an arrogant bastard if you thought I would lower myself

to the level of a pirate's son."

Jesperin's hand shot out and gripped my chin tightly enough to make me gasp. His hot skin was a surprise against my own, but I was focused on the glint in his eyes of something I could not place. His smirk was gone, replaced with his lips in a line. It was the first time he'd looked serious all evening.

His low voice was ominous as he spoke, "You have made the connection, then."

I'd only made the connection on our walk outside, but the name Ulara was the same that Eriel had given me when I asked about his costume. It did not look as though Jesperin himself could be the famous captain and so I had put two and two together.

My delivery of this information... could have been better.

"Well, it is impressive, Queenie," he murmured, clenching his jaw as he studied me.

I tried my best not to roll my eyes at the nickname he had bestowed on me. I hoped he would stop using it without my having to ask, knowing it would probably only encourage him to use it more if I said anything.

"Yes, my father was Captain Ulara, but to think you would place yourself so much higher over the new Lord of Demorai Island..." he tutted, "It's a beginner's mistake."

My blood ran cold at the way he spoke, clenching my teeth to stop myself from speaking or trying to bite his head off. I could feel my fingers twitching in their attempt to grab hold of his collar and shove him back.

It was as though he could feel my turmoil because he winked at me, and his hand dropped from my chin and moved to hold the hilt of the sword that was at my hip. "I don't think you understand the power I hold over you. What secrets I know about your short reign... and my, my, they would certainly cause some of your supporters to turn away from you."

"What is it that you think you know?"

"The whereabouts of your parents."

He certainly lived up to the rumours – and to his insufferable nickname.

Chapter Four



His words made me forget my manners. I saw the handle of a blade in his boot shine for a second time as I glanced down and decided to take my chance. I raised my leg and kneed the man in his lower stomach, catching him off guard, and he let go of me and dropped his fox-headed cane in the process.

The broad-shouldered man stumbled backwards with a groan, and I took the chance to launch myself at him, stealing the dagger hidden in his boot. Once my fingers locked around the handle, I raised it to put the blade against his stomach.

His eyebrows raised, the ink on his cheek stretching as he did so, but I kept my eyes on his. “I see you are not to be threatened so easily, Queenie.”

“And that is *your* beginner’s mistake,” I hissed at him, glancing through the glass doors beside where I held the man, hoping no one had watched the two of us. I’d be backed into a corner if they thought I’d accepted the man so quickly.

I did so hate being backed into things.

The man let out a low chuckle, holding his hands up in surrender, and he tilted his head to one side as though he did not quite realise that I really would run him through if I had to.

It wouldn’t be the first time I’d killed anyone, after all.

“Now, tell me what you know about my parents,” I demanded, but was answered with a cruel laugh instead. I glared at him as I realised he was making fun of me. “I do not want to play your perverse game, Ular. Is this the pathetic ammunition you have against me? Have you been selling my false secrets out to the highest bidder?”

“I can’t give you that information for nothing in return. I told you I’d give you another reason to accept my proposal.” He shrugged his broad shoulders, and his dazzling eyes stayed focused on me – neither of us wanting to be the first to let their guard down and look away.

I bared my teeth at him in disgust. “What is even in this proposal for you?”

“I’d get a beautiful, intelligent wife—”

“I want the *true* reason,” I snapped harshly, trying to ignore the heat rising to my cheeks.

“Someone has some anger problems.” He huffed, continuing before I could respond, “I don’t want to *actually* marry you, Queenie. But an engagement will give me enough time to get what I am looking for in Crimone. People will not suspect me or question my motives if I am your fiancé.”

For a moment, I took his words in, and slowly lowered the dagger from his stomach – putting it back in his boot. My finger brushed against the side of his leg in the process, and I did not miss the way his fingers twitched in reaction to my touch. *I wondered if any other part of his body had done the same.*

“Should I be questioning your motives?” I asked but gave him no time to answer. “And *if* I agree, you will tell me what you know about my parents?”

The thought of someone knowing the information was enough to make me want to promise the man anything.

I couldn’t let that information get out – I would have to die first.

Jesperin moved to retrieve his cane from the floor, throwing it up and catching it with ease, before placing it back on the ground with a small click. “When I have done all I need to here, yes.”

Not exactly what I wanted to hear. He was going to use me and then probably share his information with the one who gave him the highest offer for it.

“I do not accept your poor attempt at a proposal,” I answered coldly, and made my way toward the doors.

I twisted the crystal handle beneath my hand and opened the doors into the ballroom, but not before hearing a quiet chuckle. “Then I will just try again until you accept me, Queenie.”

His footsteps could be heard behind mine and the soft clack of his cane on the floor again. Heads turned our way as they made room for me to glide through to where the throne was. The figures beneath their masks and costumes were not ones I knew well, and it dawned on me just how many of them I could not truly trust. Any of them could be bought off at a higher price than what my rule offered them.

I would just have to make sure to offer them what they wanted.

I could not stand being one step behind anyone, but I should have counted myself lucky. Jesperin Utara was a handsome man, if infuriating and conceited, with money and a trading route that many would desire.

He was a good match. But something about the man unnerved me, and I did not want to promise myself to him... not yet, anyway.

My head turned as I thought of him and stared at the man from over my shoulder.

Jesperin smirked wickedly, and he nodded to where my tall friend was making his way towards us.

“Cat – I mean, My Queen,” Eriel panted, having rushed across the room. He looked rosy in the cheeks; face full of confusion.

“Oh my, those horns are quite exquisite, sir. I, unfortunately, did not inherit those,” Jesperin joked, tapping his smooth chin before he winked at Eriel – who blushed at the compliment. Jesperin excused himself to go and mingle with the guests.

People seemed more inclined to speak to the man, but it was clear that he had the attention of the room, gazes glued to him as he moved. My meeting with him had gained him some standing, and since he walked away from us so quickly, I had no time to introduce him properly to Eriel.

“That man is maddening,” I told him in a hushed tone, trying to stay calm. “He put me in quite the situation out there.”

“He didn’t try to put his hands on you, did he?” Eriel looked furious at the idea, “Because if he has... I will defend your honour, Cat. You just give me the word and I’ll ask him to duel.”

I knew he was just looking out for me, his dark eyes filled with a fondness for our friendship – a loyalty that could never be shaken.

But I shook my head firmly. “Worse than that, he said he knew about my parents,” I muttered, making sure no one was listening to us. I wondered if he really had shared the information with Lord Josephite, as Mirana had insinuated.

“He knows?” Eriel’s brows furrowed. I tried to stifle the laugh that wanted to leave my lips when his mask scrunched up at the action, but the time was inappropriate. He did not realise my struggle and continued, “How would he know such a thing?”

“I don’t know, but I’ll have to keep an eye on him.” I sighed heavily. I wondered if I should tell Eriel of the proposal but decided I’d keep it to myself.

I was in control. I had it under control.

My friend seemed to realise where my thoughts were going. “I’ll look into him and have his little group questioned.”

As I was about to thank him, a loud thud was heard, and I whipped my head round to the noise of a cry for help – my hand flying to my sword. I instantly saw it was not needed and let go, striding towards the commotion and waving a hand for the people to let me through.

A tall woman had her heeled boot firmly planted on Lord Josephite’s chest. Her raven black hair was flowing past her shoulders to her waist, parts of it braided, but there was a small bun atop her head – a jade hair pin keeping it there. The tip of her long sword grazed the quivering male’s neck, and her dark red lips quipped into a sadistic smile. She had a diamond-shaped face, making her features seem hard – her skin smooth and fawn.

Meeting my gaze with her angular lilac eyes, she spoke in a husky tone, “Your Majesty, I thought it was a cockroach. I can’t stand disgusting insects.”

I felt my cheeks heat a little under her intense stare, her presence intimidating even to me. “What is it that Lord Josephite has done to offend you, Miss...?”

“Her name is Riddel, and she’s just that – quite a riddle.” Jesperin laughed at his own joke as he walked to stand at my side, his arm brushing against my own. “Come on now, Riddel, tell us what the naughty man has done to deserve such treatment.”

It took everything in me not to roll my eyes.

“He has offended me by speaking ill of you, Majesty,” Riddel drawled, twisting the blade, the man letting out a yelp as the blade dug into his skin further. I could see a small welt of blood against his olive skin, his brown eyes full of terror. The slender woman pressed her foot down with more strength, her smooth pale leg visible between the slit of her black dress. It was a scandalous design... and one I might have to steal.

The sharp breath that left Jesperin’s mouth made me roll my eyes. “Well, how disgraceful indeed!”

Elbowing him in the side discreetly, I cleared my throat. “I would appreciate it if you would let him up – regardless of what he has done.”

Riddel bowed her head politely, and removed her heel from the man, but not before pretending to trip and press down against him harder. “Oh, *I am sorry*.” She smirked and lifted her leg from him, turning to disappear into the crowd.

I watched her pause and crouch to pick up a fallen fan, handing it to a small curvy red-haired woman. Riddel grinned when the woman thanked her, before sauntering away, with all eyes on her.

“Who is she to you?” I asked Jesper, the two of us watching Lord Josephite be pulled onto his feet by some onlookers. His face was quite red and seemed to have aged another ten years.

Jesperin leaned his head down. “Just a good friend, don’t get too jealous, Kitty Cat.”

Outraged, I turned my face to him but gulped when I realised just how close he was to me. The heat rose to my cheeks, and I poked my finger against his chin to make him move backwards. “Don’t call me that.”

“Why? I think it’s quite fitting.” Jesperin winked. His humour dissipated when Lord Josephite interrupted the conversation. It was strange to see all the mirth radiating from Jesperin disappear and be replaced by what I could only describe as revulsion.

The lord was being supported by his young son and even younger third wife. Before he could fire his insults in my direction, I raised a hand to stop him, turning on my heel. “Find me tomorrow with your complaints, Lord Josephite. Tonight is for celebration, and you would *all* do well to remember that.”

However, it was anything but a celebration for me. It was a night that had only confirmed my worries, and I was left wondering what could be so

important to the mysterious demon lord in Crimone.

Chapter Five



The night dragged on, song after song playing until the sun was beginning to rise, and I only managed to fall into my bed in the early hours of the morning. Even then, I had tossed and turned, unable to let sleep wash over me as it so desperately wanted to. My brain tried to understand what had happened – I ran through all the ways that The Fox could have found out about my parents.

It was even harder to drag myself down the stairs to the secondary dining room for breakfast the next morning. It was quieter than the large first dining room, creating a familiar atmosphere. The room was a pale yellow with large windows that let the morning sunlight in – they overlooked the rose gardens which was a beautiful sight at this time of year.

It was one of my favourite rooms in the castle – one of the few places that did not feel dreary or gaudy.

Henvale Castle had been built during my grandfather's reign. I'd never met him but had always been told he was a serious man, who did not have an eye for detail or the latest arts and fashions.

My parents, on the other hand, spent years trying to catch up with the other kingdoms. Which explained why every room was full of paintings, tapestries, and sculptures – all purchased from the other kingdoms and their famous artists.

Crimone lacked culture in that regard – where Wertheria and Dalvesta did not.

My hand pulled at the black fabric of the skirt of my dress, as I slumped down into the chair at the head of the table, rubbing my temples. I was grateful to be the first one in the room as it gave me a chance to bask in the silence.

The light from outside caught my eye as it caught on a painting of the late Kings of Crimone and Wertheria, signing a treaty of some kind.

“Something on your mind, Kitty Cat?” a smooth voice reached my ears, a hand brushing lightly over my arm.

I almost jumped out of my seat, my fingers gripping the arms of the chair, and I stared up at the striking man. Jesperin had scraped his hair back into a small ponytail, the silvery bangs hanging into his eyes. Instead of the gaudy white clothes from the night before, he wore a black shirt and ornately decorated navy overcoat, with trousers and black knee-high boots.

I narrowed my eyes at the man, ignoring the sparkle in his seductive gaze. “I told you not to call me that, Ulara.”

“Oh, come now, we’re going to be married. You should call me my name, or even better, a little nickname.” Jesperin smirked, his slender fingers stroking along the tabletop as he made his way to the seat at the left of the table, flopping into it. He threw one leg over the other and poured himself some fresh fruit juice.

Taking a sip from my own goblet I let the liquid ease my aching throat and the dull ache that was filling my head. “I did not accept your proposal, remember? And do you ever shut up? Your voice is so incredibly grating,” I grumbled, more to myself than to him. I hoped that he would not respond.

However, I was out of luck, and the man seemed to take any chance to talk.

Jesperin disregarded my comment about rejecting him. “No, I never stop talking, Kitty Cat,” he answered cheerfully, running his pink tongue over his red lips after taking a gulp of the juice. My eyes followed the movement of his throat. Taking a deep breath, I swallowed hard as he said, “Something you want to ask me? I bet you’re wondering what else I can do with my tongue. Well, I could show you instead of telling you—”

Don’t tempt me with sinful things.

“Please, I just want to have a peaceful breakfast, is that too much to ask for?” I was exasperated already, gulping as I tried to cover up the fact that the heat was rushing to my neck, and I could feel flutters within my stomach.

“Peaceful... I can do peaceful,” Jesperin hummed, already beginning to uncover some of the food and put it on his plate, his forearms resting on the table – I chose not to correct him on his manners.

He piled his plate high with eggs, bacon, and freshly baked bread. I reached to take some for myself but found that I could not stop watching him, intrigued by the way he seemed like an excited child. Jesper grinned when he would unveil another dish, leaning forward to smell it.

It gave me the chance to see that he had not worn make-up today, instead, he had a clean face, the mark beneath his eye more prominent because of this.

I cleared my throat as I picked up my knife and fork. “Do you not have food like this on the island?”

Jesperin was caught off guard by the question, hesitating over putting the fourth egg onto his plate but deciding to do so anyway. “We do, but I never had this sort of thing growing up, so I’m making the most of it now.”

Too curious, I continued, “Did you grow up on a ship with your father?”

He finished his mouthful before he said, “Why are you so interested in my upbringing, Kitty Cat?”

I groaned audibly at the nickname. “If we are to get through this meal, surely we should get to know one another?” And hopefully, I’d be able to get him to lower his guard enough to tell me information that would be of use to me.

“A fair point.” He nodded. “I grew up on the sea, on my father’s ship ‘*The Wailing Siren*’. That was until I was about fifteen. Then, I was dumped on the island when he died – leaving me to fend for myself after that.”

“What about your mother? What happened to her?”

“So many questions so early in the morning,” Jesperin teased, eating another fork-full of food before he began to respond. “She was a human woman, who wanted nothing to do with my demon pirate father after having me. Took one look at my eyes and threw me on the ship. Never saw her again after.”

I knew what he was doing and for a moment it worked; I did feel a pang in my heart. To get rid of this feeling, I stuffed some scrambled eggs into my mouth and savoured the salty taste.

“Now it’s my turn to ask you a few questions.” He waved his knife in my direction before putting a bit of butter on it.

I was dreading what he would ask, not sure I’d be able to answer, and I didn’t want to anger him when he was being so obliging. However, I also didn’t feel as comfortable as he did.

“What is your favourite colour?” he asked, simply.

Surprised by the question, I didn’t answer it immediately. This made Jesperin chuckle, and I could see his dimples. I had to admit that he looked handsome, and he appeared less arrogant than he had the night before – but it was probably because there was not a crowd to show off to.

It was just me, and maybe I wasn’t worth the energy.

Or maybe... he was genuinely trying to be polite.

“My favourite colour is pink,” I answered truthfully, looking down at my plate, a lump forming in my throat. Very few people had ever cared, and he probably didn’t either, but to be asked such a normal question... well, it hit a nerve.

“Pink? Well, I would have had you down for the colour of blood or something. Are we talking a similar shade to the one your cheeks have turned?” he teased, his tongue brushing the inside of his cheek.

“Anything else you want to ask?” I answered instead, trying to divert him.

The man smiled wickedly as he turned his head to me, and I realised I should not have given him an invitation to ask. “Why don’t you tell me what your plan was last night? Was there a lucky person you had decided to marry? I think everyone was rather surprised you did not make an announcement. Your hand is quite sought after – you’re an old maid by many standards. What are you, over five and twenty?”

He didn’t need to know I had no intention of marrying anyone in the room last night. Keeping my cards close to my chest, I replied, “I have no one in mind – and you would do well not to insult your host by calling her old. Especially not when I am only six and twenty.”

“Not my fault you’re bordering on old hag territory.”

“Say that again and I’ll throw you in my dungeon.”

“Oh, don’t seduce me like that, Queenie. I might just fall for it.”

We were interrupted when the door flew open, and a large grey beast ran through. Alarmed, I dropped my cutlery and watched as the staff came running after it, although they did not appear to want to get too close. One was clutching a net, the other was hiding behind him.

The beady black eyes of the animal locked with mine, and it sniffed around my hand. It was twice the size of the average dog and had pointed ears and a long snout. The smell emanating from the animal was earthy – similar to how the air was when it was about to rain.

“He likes you,” Jesperin commented before whistling low, the large animal turning around to settle at the man’s side.

“What... what is he?” I got out, putting a hand over my heart, and finally letting the breath out that I had been holding.

“You’ve never seen a wolf before?” Jesperin leaned down to the animal, a dark chuckle leaving his lips, his hand ruffling the grey fur of the animal. “I picked Arka up when I arrived on the island. He was just a pup then.”

“Wolves live on the island?” I managed to get out, feeling uncomfortable as I watched the wolf snort at the table. Jesperin fed the hungry animal some bacon, not even slightly scared that he might lose a finger in the process. I was startled by how gently the animal took the food – hardly touching anything but the crispy treat.

Jesper did not look up from his own food as he spoke, “How much do you know about Demorai Island and the rumours that surround it? Perhaps I could dispel some of them for you, and it might make you more at ease with me.”

“Why would I want to feel at ease with you? I’m perfectly content right now,” I argued.

“I thought you wanted a peaceful breakfast?” He sulked for a moment, sniffing indignantly.

Arka roamed about the room before he settled to sit at my side when he knew he would not get anything else out of Jesperin. I went still as the animal nudged his cold snout against my hand again and took in my scent.

I made a face at Jesper’s words. “Fine, I’ll *try*,” I got out, fighting everything in my brain that was attempting to get me to stay quiet and not tell him anything. “Jesper,” I settled on, deciding the name would have to sate him enough for now.

His eyes sparkled, and as he opened his soft lips to respond, I answered him swiftly, “I’ve heard that they were the ones that started mutating demons. The rumours have been spreading rapidly for years after what happened in the Wertherian royal family.”

Wertheria made it widely known that they were searching for the mutators. Their king, Valentine, had many demons on his council, and he wanted to see an end to the mutators for good.

Jesperin nodded as he made to clean his plate, I waited, with my patience running thin – but he was content to take his time. “Well, you’re looking at one. One born from a mutated demon, that is.” He tapped his cheek where the black ink stained his face, and he scratched it with his nail to prove that it would not come off.

“Part of the mutation?”

“Yes. My father had a mark that was similar when they experimented on him when he was a young man. He never told me much about what they did or how it happened, but I heard bits and pieces that he told the crew.” The man smirked, covering up the sadness in his eyes before I could comment on it further. “But perhaps that’s enough information for now.”

I regretted being open with him. He was playing a game, and I had fallen into the trap.

“Right. Well, I have certainly had enough of your company.” My seat scraped along the floor, and Arka stood upright again, the animal licking my hand. I groaned at the feeling, wiping my hand on my skirts as I began to walk away. “If you have a problem, ask for Lord Swan.”

I didn’t turn around as he spoke, mirth evident in his tone, “Can I not ask for you?”

“Definitely not. Only do so if you want me to send you back to your nice *new* island, Lord Ulara,” my words were full of venom, the click of my satin heels coming to a stop when I heard his final words.

“You wouldn’t dare. I still need to talk to you about *Cate*.”

The doors slammed closed behind me before I could respond.

Chapter Six



The relief that rushed through me when I entered the improvised work room was intense and much needed.

My refuge was in the chapel– it was still decorated with religious images of the goddesses from when it was actively used as a prayer room. I slammed the door shut behind me and leaned against the column nearest the door.

Where Wertheria had no set religion, Crimone was strict on what we believed, wanting people to honour it.

The children of the kingdom were brought up to worship Laxia, goddess of the earth, Julen, goddess of the night, and Maylia, goddess of the heavens. We believed that the goddesses guided us in our choices and that they should be celebrated, whether that be through prayer, belief, or through acceptance in death.

If someone did not believe in them, they were not shunned, but there was a great relief that people felt by believing in them.

There were many tales of the goddesses that were told in the *Vitus Liber*. The *Vitus Liber* was filled with tales written of the times long before the kingdoms even existed as their separate regions. It is believed that the three goddesses once lived among humans, and they wrote the stories before they left. The tales were usually told orally or performed in moral plays and had been printed and taught in Crimonian schools for centuries.

I read a lot about the women myself. I found them fascinating and felt as though I could call them my friends.

One of my favourite paintings was captured on the limestone chapel wall. It was an image of the goddesses on thrones, the trio alongside one another. They were painted to be adorned in dark silks, each with an item that represented what they were the goddess of. Laxia cradled a basket of plants in her lap, representing earth. Jules wore a crown of stars that was the night, and Maylia held a feather – demonstrating the softness that was expected of the heavens.

I had painted it myself.

It was a rather spectacular piece.

I stared at it for a moment, my shoulders relaxing. The goddesses represented years of my studies, locked in the castle – most of the time without anyone to talk to aside from myself and the goddesses.

Through the two glass windows, the midday sun gleamed through to create a rainbow over the stone floor.

Taking off my laced gloves, I took a seat on the stool in front of the half-finished canvas. I was glad I had worn black so that nothing would be stained with paint – that was a mistake I'd made before and been reprimanded for it.

Slowly, I picked up a paintbrush and dipped the brush into two of my oil paints to mix them together the colour I needed. Turning back to the canvas, I began to swipe it across for the background, trying to get the right textures.

I did not know who it was that I was painting, but it was the image of a woman that always entered my dreams. Even as a child I could recall dreaming of her, her eyes a similar colour to my own.

This was not the first time I had tried to capture her image. Over the years, I'd often sketched her in the back of my schoolbooks or in chalk on the stones of the castle. I never had proper art supplies until my eighteenth birthday when I was gifted some paints from Eriel and a set of paint brushes from someone unknown.

Eriel and I had asked around for years about who had sent it to me, but all that was left in the box of brushes was a rushed note that bid me happy birthday and no name.

No one laid claim to it, and I had tried to forget about it over the years. It still bothered me, though.

When I came to paint the face, I hesitated, not wanting to mess it up and have to start again – as I'd done so many times in the past.

"Who is she?" a voice asked, and I looked over my shoulder to discover who it had come from. Jesper was standing in the doorway, wearing a smirk.

"Do you not know how to knock?" I asked the red-haired male as he wandered into the room. I was still frustrated with him from breakfast.

Standing behind me, he brushed a hand past my face as he pointed at the canvas again. "Are you going to answer me?"

A sigh left my lips as he refused to comment on the knocking. "I don't know who it is. Just a lady."

"She looks familiar."

His words were unexpected, and I watched his golden eyes scan over the paint before flickering down to me. Underneath the overcoat from breakfast, he wore a male corset with subtle gold embroidery. It highlighted his physique, and I cleared my throat, knowing that I'd once again been admiring the man.

"Familiar? In what way?" I asked to distract him from my staring.

The man was smug as he brushed a hand through his bangs, the silver mixing in with the red for a moment, and I swallowed as his eyes closed and his lashes fluttered. "Like someone I've seen in a dream."

He had seen her too? Perhaps the woman was more common than I thought.

Or he was not telling me the truth.

The tall man turned, and he dragged another stool up towards my own, sitting down on it. It was amusing – the way he looked too big for it with his long limbs.

"I am surprised to see you actually have a hobby," Jesper said teasingly, and he shifted himself about on the stool to get comfortable.

I snorted noisily. "Why is that so surprising? Do royals not get to have hobbies? Are we not human?"

His grin was wicked. "You are. *Very* human, painfully so," he answered with an irritating tut. "Humans are so weak in comparison to us demons. That is why you have hunted us for years as your hobby."

I raised an eyebrow at the hatred that dripped into his words, and I kept my focus on the canvas, painting slowly so that I could talk at the same

time. “Crimone has not hunted demons for hundreds of years. It doesn’t make it better, but it is a start.”

It was his turn to look bewildered. “Crimone doesn’t hunt demons? But my father told me...”

“Individuals might, but the kingdom is quite accepting of them, just like Wertheria. Dalvesta is the kingdom you need to be worried about,” I said candidly, finding the very idea of prosecuting demons absurd. It is one of the only things I had agreed about with my parents.

“Well, my father must have met some terrible Crimonians.” Jesper shrugged, letting the conversation pass.

Feeling a silence fall upon us, I decided I had to fill it, asking him more about himself in the hopes that it might make him feel more comfortable around me. *Maybe he would tell me how he knew about Cate.*

I could feel my hair stand on end at the very thought of his lips curling around the letters of the name. It felt so wrong to hear him say it, and it had been an age since I’d heard it.

“You seem very fond of your father,” I commented, and I let myself glance at the man, who was still staring at the canvas from over my shoulder. “What was it like growing up on a ship? I have only ever seen the inside of the castle walls.”

A little honesty from myself might make him talk. But giving him this information was still hard. I could feel my brain wanting to claw back the words.

“Traumatic for a young boy but spirit-building,” he answered with a wave of his hand, not going into more detail than that. I noticed, after listening closely, that he pronounced his ‘t’s in a clipped way – which was more common in Wertheria.

“Your accent is interesting. Do the people on Demorai Island speak the same way as you?” I asked. I realised I had no normal information about those outside of Crimone aside from people who visited the castle.

Raising a brow, Jesperin smiled at my question. “Yes, this is the accent of the island. Is it not pleasing to your Crimonian ears?”

Flushing at his teasing tone, I said, “It just sounds different from what I have heard before. No other reason.”

Jesper seemed fluent in Crimonian, and the accent was only slightly different. It sounded like a mix of the kingdoms together. It was not something I had stopped to think over before, but I found myself yearning

to learn more about the demon, even though my brain was telling me to keep the gap between us wide.

“And your wolf? Where is he?”

“Taking a short run with Riddel towards the port,” he answered. It made sense. Henvale Castle was built towards the coast, in the south of Crimone, only an hour or so ride away. “Arka misses the sea. But why do you ask? Did you take a shine to him?” Jesper smirked, and from the corner of my eye, I watched as he dipped his finger some yellow paint, rubbing it between his index finger and thumb.

Reaching out to catch his wrist when he moved his hand towards the canvas, I glared at his mischievous face. “Don’t even think about it. I’ll cut your hand off without a second thought, Ulara.”

Jesper laughed vigorously at this and did not make any effort to remove his wrist from my iron grip. “I like your violent words, Queenie, truly.”

“You really are sick and twisted. Keep your deviant thoughts to yourself next time,” I huffed and jerked my hand away as though his skin was flaming hot.

As I made to turn away from him, his painted fingers gripped my chin, and he tugged me backwards so I’d had to stare at him from upside down. My stool had risen from the ground, tipped backwards, and it prevented me from making any sudden movements without tipping over completely. He was standing up, and his other hand slipped to cup the back of my head.

I gripped onto his arm, my nails digging into his clothes in the hopes that they would pinch his skin beneath. I felt a small victory as his face tugged into a wince.

My breath was leaving my body in sharp hisses, panic rushing through my veins.

“Be careful, Kitty Cat,” Jesper growled; teeth bared. “You should remember I know something about you. Maybe you should start trying to be nicer to me.”

“You’re unbearable. You think you can just manipulate me to do what you want and that I’ll be at your whim—” I snapped but regretted it instantly when he pulled my chin back further and the stool slipped more with the weight of my body. “Stop it, Ulara!”

“Then listen very closely, Your Majesty.” Jesper gripped my jaw harder as he stared down at my dangling form. “I’m not here to make your life hard. In fact, having you as my wife would be very beneficial to both of

us. Your reign will be more secure with my help. But if you keep fighting me at every turn, this isn't going to work." He was frustrated, his chest heaved as he spoke again, "You think me your enemy, but I am trying to prove to you I am not."

"You have given me no reason to trust you. Just look at the position we're in!" I snapped, "I will find a different option. Anything would be better than being shackled to you for life."

The comment appeared to trigger something within the man as his face came closer to mine, his minty breath tickled my skin as he stroked his lips across my cheek.

The fire it sent throughout me made me embarrassed.

I did not want to react that way, and yet it made my head spin. I wanted to lean up and capture his lips with my own, for him to close the distance and smash his lips against mine in a hungry kiss.

Jesper smelt of soap and citrus – I wondered if it was something he applied or if it was in the soap itself. It overwhelmed my senses, clouding my judgement. Even my stomach was in knots just thinking about what might happen next.

I was no blushing virgin, but I'd never felt the pull to someone that I did with Jesper. The aggressive way he held me didn't scare me; it only made my skin tingle in anticipation. My feelings were getting harder to disguise by the second.

"Then let me offer you another reason to put your trust in me," he muttered, lips ghosting over mine as he spoke, his hands securely keeping me steady.

One little kiss wouldn't hurt, right?

The movement of his hands was fast as he turned me in my seat, so I was no longer dangling. His legs moving between my own and he kept my chin tilted up to him.

Jesperin's touch was light as he stroked a hand down my spine, my body arching in response to him, and I gulped. "Have you ever heard of a demon oath?" He asked.

I raised an eyebrow at his words, wracking my brain for the words that didn't sound familiar together. "Only when you said it before on the balcony when you spoke of your costume. What is it?"

"A demon oath. It is where a demon makes a vow to someone, and if they break their vow, they die," he explained effortlessly, the words

leaving his lips calmly as if the idea was nothing to him. *He was so willing to give me an oath?*

Thinking his words over, I clicked my tongue in disbelief. “Die? Do you just drop dead? If so, sign me up.”

He chuckled low in amusement. “Well, our heart stops beating, yes.”

“What heart?” I scoffed and sat back in my chair. “Does it have to be a romantic thing? Do they make oaths to people they love?”

“Ha. Ha. Very funny. But no, it doesn’t have to be romantic. A demon oath is similar to an old kind of magic, when the right words are said, it acts like a spell of sorts,” Jesperin clarified, and I could feel his thumb brushing circles on my lower back. It felt nice and I cleared my throat in an attempt to stay focused.

He looked far too pleased with himself.

“Now you really are messing with me. Magic hasn’t been practised for hundreds of years in any of the kingdoms.”

“Stranger things have happened.” He shrugged.

“Why should I believe you?”

“You really don’t like to put trust in anyone, do you?” The man huffed, shaking his head, his hair beginning to fall out of the ribbon that was holding it in place. “Ask anyone who knows about it. They’ll tell you it is true. Or perhaps your library will have a book on the first oath. I’ve heard the story of Stepha and King Matthias is quite the bestseller. Why, I even have a copy of it in my own home.”

I rolled my eyes at his cheeky response but found that my lips wanted to form a smile. “Alright, say I do believe you. Would you make me the oath right now? Is there a special, magical ceremony we have to prepare?”

Jesper grinned, eyes sparkling with. “Now *you* are making fun of *me*.” He tutted mischievously. “I’ll say the words now if you like, then when you do your research, you will know I am being sincere, Kitty Cat.”

The nickname made my toes curl, and I reached out to grab him by the collar of his coat, tugging him down towards me once more. His large hands rested on my forearms, delight dancing in his gaze.

“Go on then,” I pressed.

“I vow that I am your loyal servant, and I will protect you until my dying day, Queen Catania. *Amo. Loiete. Faraever*,” Jesper spoke the words confidently in his deep, velvety voice, his lips perfectly pronouncing every

syllable as though he were making sure I understood the gravity of what he was saying.

The last three words were foreign to me, and I did not know what they meant. Something glistened in his gaze as he looked at me and, for a split second, I wondered if magic really was at play.

Jesper must have realised I'd never ask him what it meant. "The words translate to 'Love. Loyalty. Forever.' Satisfied, Queenie?"

"Not... quite," I muttered, knowing the desire burning through my body was yet to be sated.

"How dirty you are, Kitty Cat," Jesperin teased, brushing his thumb and finger down my neck slowly before taking a step back from me.

Surprised at the words, I looked down at where his fingers had trailed, seeing two perfect lines of yellow paint there. The paint stopped just above my chest and my head shot up, a blush rushing to my cheeks.

"Quite literally dirty." He smirked. "You should clean yourself up before anyone assumes that the queen is anything but perfect."

"They don't think that anyway."

"No, but it can't hurt to pretend. You seem to like doing that."

I watched as he turned away from me, disappearing from the room and leaving me with more burning questions and a need for some private time.

The stupid thing was, I was starting to consider his proposal.

Painting was the last thing on my mind after that. I placed everything away and returned to do some work at my desk for the rest of the afternoon.

Eriel and I dined together, but it was relatively dull in comparison to my conversations with the mysterious Jesperin Utara. The man had managed to make my heart do things I didn't know it was capable of.

I had a drink before going to bed that night. Usually, I didn't like the taste of wine; it had given me too many headaches on the days after drinking it, but I felt it was needed that night. It tasted bitter as I swallowed down every last drop.

Stumbling towards my bed chambers, I threw off my clothes, not bothering to change into a nightgown. Instead, I stayed in my thin chemise.

"Huh, I'm exhausted... this isn't like me," I mumbled, which was followed by a yawn.

I felt drowsy, my body heavy as I fell asleep on top of the covers – hardly able to keep myself upright.

My body was jolted awake, my head feeling cloudy as I tried to sit up. I gripped the material beneath my head, startled to find it was hard.

Opening my eyes, I gasped as I realised my head had been resting in someone's lap.

My head shot up despite the pounding that followed, and I stared into two golden eyes.

“Hello, Kitty Cat.”

Chapter Seven



My body leapt into action, and I scrambled out of his lap, a grunt leaving when I hit my head against glass. A hiss left my lips as I started to rub my forehead, the sharp pain not disappearing immediately.

I turned my upper body, startled to realise I was in a carriage. What was even worse, was that it was light outside and I did not recognise the surroundings. I'd never been far from Henvale, but something felt wrong.

"You better start explaining yourself, Ulara," I demanded, glaring in his direction again.

Jesper leaned against the plush velvet seats of the carriage, brushing a finger over his smiling lips. "What would you like to know, Kitty Cat?"

"Where are we, and where are we going?" I snapped furiously, not able to control my anger.

"We are currently in Melian, and I am taking you to my home."

I stared at him as my mind tried to process his simple words. We were in the capital of Demorai Island. He had managed to transport me from the castle and over the sea in an evening without me waking up. I knew the wine had tasted strange but had thought nothing of it at the time. Whatever he used must have been strong.

I jabbed my finger in his direction, fuming. "You drugged me."

"It was rather easy, Queenie. Your staff don't pay much attention to who is passing them by." Jesper chuckled, winking.

My eyes ran over the clothes I'd been changed into. The forest green gown was full, with a petticoat beneath. The bodice was a little revealing for my liking, the sleeves long with a white ruffle at the ends. It was a pretty gown, not one I'd have chosen myself. "Who dressed me?"

"Don't worry, Riddel made sure you were presentable."

I glanced across to the other side of the carriage where Riddel was sitting, Arka was sleeping across her lap, and she wore a smirk – although her eyes not on us. "Do continue questioning him, Your Majesty. It is entertaining to listen to him be challenged."

Humiliation was running through my body. I'd been subjected to it as a child and refused to bring it into adulthood with me.

"So, you have kidnapped me, Lord Ulara." All pretence of being nice had left me, no more calling him by his nickname. He had stolen me from my home, and I was worried about what would happen in my absence.

Jesper raised an eyebrow, his long lashes fluttering in my direction. "Not exactly, Kitty Cat... and no one will suspect you are gone. I shall return you when we have finished our business."

"You might as well take the experience and enjoy it, Your Majesty. You have never been to the island before, have you?" Riddel added, her heavily kohl lined eyes flickering between us, and I stayed with my body as far away from Jesper as I could.

Eventually, I shook my head, and she smiled warmly. Her lilac eyes were piercing and might have been perceived as judgemental. However, there was something that made me think of myself in her stare. "Well then, we will make your time here enjoyable," she finished.

I cleared my throat, still trying to make the heat in my cheeks die down. "Why will no one realise I'm gone? I'm the queen – they expect me to carry out my daily duties."

"Ah, well, Riddel dealt with all that." Jesper waved a hand, his slender fingers brushing through the air until they landed on my knee. I tensed, both annoyed, and oddly hot at the touch. "For all those that ask, I am giving you a tour of Demorai Island, so that you might know how to conduct trade with us."

"That was never on the cards," I grumbled but went quiet when his gaze turned hard.

He gave my knee a small squeeze, tingles running through my body. "I know – which is why I am putting it on them. Your friend from

Wertheria... Oh, what was her name again—”

“Serena Everenden,” Riddel completed for him.

“Yes, her. She has offered to stay on whilst you are away.”

I rubbed my pounding head with my hand, running it over my face after a moment as I contemplated what I could do. I knew I had no choice but to accept the hospitality of the man and try to learn as much as I could.

The more I knew, the more I could use it to my advantage.

I watched out of the window of the carriage, spotting people walking the streets. People who looked like Riddel and Jesper.

They were mainly demons. Whilst demons were not frowned upon in Crimone, it was strange to see so many walking about. I knew in Wertheria there was a higher population of demons, but in Crimone only one in fifty people were demons – it was all information I’d learned from the eavesdropping on meetings I was not a part of.

It was probably because they were all on the island. It was similar to what I’d imagined; the houses looked the same as those in Crimone – as did the fashion.

I was not sure why I thought it would be so unique. It might have been a childish fantasy of mine to think that it would be different – that I hoped it would look different.

It was a cloudy day and people were clothed in cloaks which led me to believe there was probably a breeze. It was just coming into the middle of spring and some days were cooler than others.

I spotted one woman, who had two small horns that grew from her forehead. The next man my gaze landed on had pink-tinged skin. These must have been mutated demons – or children of those who had been mutated. My eyes flickered back to Jesper, who watched me examine the people.

“Would you like to get out and have a look around, Kitty Cat? You could probably do with some air after those nasty drugs Riddel gave you.”

“Oh, you’re blaming me for that, are you?” Riddel rolled her lilac eyes, amused.

“Of course, Riddy. You’re my scapegoat for everything. You should know that by now. It’s been ten years,” Jesper answered with a smirk and climbed from the carriage first, after calling for the driver to stop.

Arka bounded after him, the large animal eager to stretch his legs. I wondered how he had fared on the boat trip – Jesper mentioned that the

wolf liked the sea.

I frowned to myself. *How had I managed to get myself into such a mess? And to miss my first trip on a boat?*

It was something I'd dreamed of as a girl, and in one day it had been ripped away from me because of one man. I tensed my jaw, gritting my teeth to not let my anger get the better of me.

"Should I be offended that you forgot we met as children, Jesper?" Riddel scoffed, continuing their conversation. She was dressed in a similar outfit to my own. The elegant woman climbed down from the carriage in her wine-coloured gown, offering her gloved hand to me just as Jesper did the same.

"Did we really? It's not like you remind me every day of our lives," Jesper said, his face expectant as he looked at me.

Taking a breath, I ignored Jesper's offer and placed my hand in Riddel's as I stepped down onto the stones. "Thank you, Riddel."

"Anytime, Your Majesty."

Jesper reached inside, his firm chest brushing my arm and his breath fanning across the side of my face. His scent drifted up my nostrils again, assaulting my senses. I felt my fingers twitch in a need to push him away or pull him closer, but the moment was fleeting as he pulled back.

I raised an eyebrow as he placed something on my head and his fingers brushed the base of my throat. His skin was hot, and I swallowed thickly, as I knew he would be able to feel it.

"To keep the sun from your face and to prevent anyone from recognising my esteemed guest," he teased, a smirk on his face as he tied the blue ribbon. My hand reached up to brush over the straw hat that he had placed on me.

My cheeks felt hot from the small interaction between us, and I had to remind myself to stop acting like a young girl – all swoony and doe-eyed.

The tall woman winked when I raised my gaze again, and she offered her arm to me. It was as though she knew I liked to annoy Jesper, and I appreciated her gesture, linking my arm through hers.

Jesper narrowed his eyes at us before he began to walk ahead. I could hear him grumbling to himself about how I was *his* guest, not Riddel's, and it made me grin.

Becoming distracted by the scenery, I started to take everything in – the vibrant colours of the market stalls, the strong smell of spices as they

wafted under my nose.

I recognised some of the fabrics on one stall, the materials something that I'd often seen but never been able to wear. Especially the Wertherian silk – which was highly sought after in Crimone.

Something I learnt in my lessons was that Demorai Island saw a lot of trade. My tutors tried to cram all the information into my head and only some of it stuck. I'd never been one for academics or reading. I just remembered random facts.

Above our heads, scraps of material were draped as bunting. It swung in the salty breeze, and my eyes followed one of the strings into an open window of a random house. There, I was met with the beady gaze of an old leathery-faced man who scowled when we made eye contact.

I realised quickly that more people were staring at us. They must have recognised Jesper, and it occurred to me just how precarious his own position on the island must be. He had only recently taken over and dissolved the council.

Instinctively, I reached a hand out and caught the back of his black overcoat, catching up to him. His head turned down to mine, and I saw the flicker of surprise cross over his face. "Something the matter?"

"Just didn't want to lose my safe ticket through the capital," I answered coyly, hoping to be as nonchalant as possible.

Riddel laughed wheezily beside me, our arms still linked. "Being with Jesper is anything but safe."

"The people are still getting used to my rule. They are not used to one leader and, to be honest, I have not been very attentive. Which is another reason you are here—" He paused, and I scrunched my nose up when his finger tapped it. "I need you to give me a few lessons on how to take charge."

A part of me wondered if this was all an act. The man appeared over the top one moment and the next he was able to be serious and calculating.

He really did remind me of a fox.

"Could you not have just asked me back at Henvale? Like a *normal* person, Ulara," I said, and narrowed my eyes at him, fingers still gripping the back of his overcoat.

"Where's the fun in that? I've got you out of that stuffy old castle for a little trip. And you get a nice reprieve from your boring duties." Jesper grinned and brushed his arm against mine.

While he was teasing, something warmed within me. He was right. He had taken me away from the castle, and it was the first time I could remember in my life that I had not been walled in.

My head turned as some children rushed past us, three girls chasing a boy who was holding some big red apples in his arms. They were giggling, having fun. None of them cared about propriety – something I had been robbed of as a child – they had no cares in that moment.

Suddenly, they stopped when they saw who was in their path.

“It’s The Fox! My Ma will never believe me when I tell her!” One of the girls gasped, pointing in our direction.

Jesper did not react. He kept his gaze ahead, leading the way for us. I thought he liked hearing people talk about him – it was strange to see his face so severe. *I missed his smile already.*

I looked up at one of the stalls next, my eyes widening as I saw the jewels that were on display. They sparkled as we passed, and they were all different shapes and sizes.

“They’re not real. The jewels inside them are called cromons,” Riddel told me, leaning her head down to say the words. “Just knockoffs, but they’re still pretty. Very popular with the ladies.” She wiggled her hand, and she wore multiple rings of various colours.

“You can pretend they’re real – they’re convincing enough,” Jesper commented. “I should know, I’ve sold a lot of them.”

“You conned people with them?” I scoffed.

“Oh, multiple times. That’s how I met Riddel.” Jesper laughed, crinkles forming by his eyes, the ink also stretching as he did so. It was fascinating to look at.

The woman nudged me, slipping a fan out of her sleeve to hold it front of us. “He tried to sell me one on a chain, the cheeky bugger,” she sighed dramatically, waving the fan and closing it with a loud snap. “But my father used to make them, so I knew exactly what he was doing.”

I could see why the two of them got along. They were both incredibly dramatic.

Jesper threw his arm around my shoulders so he could move his mouth down to my ear. “And yet, she still fell for my tricks that day. Look at where she’s stuck now? At my side, working with me forever,” he teased.

“A curse indeed.” I chuckled but cleared my throat when I saw he was still staring at me, his face unreadable at that moment. He said that Riddel

worked with him – not for him. Maybe he was a better man than I was willing to give him credit for. He did not seem to be after power for himself alone.

I turned my head when I heard some noise down one of the streets, squinting to catch sight of two women playing music. One held an old violin, the other was playing some kind of instrument with her nose where a soft whistle left the rounded shape.

Some people stopped to give them a few coins, and I did not miss the way that Jesper nodded to Riddel, and she left my side to do the same.

They looked around my age, yet they wore rags and had dirt on their tanned skin. The two of them had beautiful smiles painted on their faces, their eyes meeting and they would change the speed of the music or begin to dance around one another.

Would my life have mirrored theirs if I were not born a princess?

“How far away is your home?” I asked.

Riddel returned and raised her hand, pointing at a large tower rising above the buildings as we continued to walk. It was like something out of a fairy-tale, old stone with ivy winding round it, and flowers decorated the grounds as we began to approach. “That is Ikra Manor, Your Majesty.”

I raised an eyebrow, wondering what was so special about it. However, as we stepped around the corner, I was surprised by the size of it. The tower was attached to a large building, enough to rival some of the manors in Crimone.

“Extraordinary, isn’t it?” Jesper sighed, taken aback himself. I watched him admire the building, the pride on his face unmeasurable. I remembered what he had told me, about his upbringing on the ship, realising it must have been an achievement for him.

He was impressive.

A demon, born of a mutated one, with no money and no parents left to truly care for him. Now he was the Lord of Demorai Island.

“Yes...” I muttered; my eyes trained on him. “Incredible.”

Chapter Eight



“I’m not wearing that. I swear to the goddesses that you would have to kill me before I put that on.” I shook my head firmly as I stared at the garment that Riddel held out to me. It was a low-cut piece, revealing in the bust area and left little to the imagination when it came to the rest of it – the silver material was surprisingly sheer.

“His Lordship picked it out especially for you, Your Majesty.”

“You can tell him he can wear it if he likes it so much.” I waved my finger at her and pointed to the bed where another dress lay. “I want to wear that one.”

Riddel huffed, folding her arms with the ugly garment draped over them. “That’s my dress.”

“And? It’s much better than the one I’m being forced into.” I rolled my eyes, huffing like a child who had been told no.

The raven-haired woman threw the ugly garment onto the bed with a wheezy laugh. I was surprised at the sudden outburst, not sure what was so funny. She excused herself from the room, and I wondered if I was about to get into trouble. It may come across that I was being fussy to her, but I’d not wear it.

That was what had been strange about the whole kidnapping – I was still not entirely sure what Jesper wanted.

I was unsure about what would happen if I said no to whatever it was.

He had been generous so far. I'd been given a tour of the old, yet beautifully decorated Ikra Manor. He made sure my room was to my liking and provided me with clothes and food. The first night we dined together, the three of us, and it was pleasant enough. I had witnessed him treating his staff with a respect that I'd not imagined he would possess. Then on the second day, he left me to my own devices since he had a meeting to attend.

Something about forming his own council. It was strange to see him in his element. He was more serious on the island – wary of his position.

Yet, the anger was still bubbling away inside of me. He could have just *asked* me to accompany him to the island.

I probably would have said no and told him to stick his invitation where the sun doesn't shine – which did make the kidnapping a little easier to understand.

Riddel returned with another garment draped over her arm, and she held it up to me for my approval. "What about this one?"

I tried not to reveal that I was pleased by keeping my face blank. I needed her to believe that I was often audience to such beautiful things and that it could not phase me.

But the gown was the most exquisite thing I had ever seen.

It had a pale pink bodice with off-the-shoulder long sleeves that would fit perfectly to my wrists. In the centre of the bodice, it parted to reveal an ivory stomacher and was decorated with embroidered pink roses. It fell into a large cream skirt with parts of the first layer parted to reveal a lighter pink – almost shimmering - beneath. There were layers of material beneath in other shades of pink and white, creating a full skirt. Beside the gown, there was a pair of short lace gloves and pink satin slippers to match the gown.

I cleared my throat, sniffing indifferently. "It will do."

Riddel chuckled and moved it so I could step into it, already dressed in my clean chemise and corset. "Jesper knew you would hate the other one – he really picked this one out for you. Oh, and he insisted you wear this."

The woman held up a pearl necklace before she moved to clasp it around my neck.

He had remembered. I told him I liked the colour pink.

I tried to ignore the rising heat in my cheeks as the woman laced me into the beautiful gown. "Jesper is different here," I blurted out.

“You mean the way he acts?” When I nodded, she continued, “Jesper has been through a lot. He’s a good man really, when you can see beneath all the arrogance. He just has a lot of ambition and wants to prove himself.”

I nodded slowly, taking in her words. “You said you have known him since you were children?”

Riddel brushed her fingers over my shoulders to straighten out the sleeves of the dress; they fell properly just off my shoulders. “Yes, we both grew up running around ports if we weren’t on a ship. That was about twenty-five years ago now-”

“Wait, how old are you both?” I asked, surprised.

“Thirty.”

“Older than I expected,” I answered, and she chuckled lightly. I did not waste any time in asking her more, “And are you a mutated demon, too?”

There was nothing to stop me from asking her. The curiosity had been eating me away for days. I’d not noticed anything other than her lilac eyes as a signal that she was a demon, but they were vibrant and startling.

She shifted, uncomfortable for the first time. “No, not mutated, my parents were both demons.”

“What is the difference between normal demons and mutated ones?” I asked her. I had my own ideas from what I’d been told growing up, but it was tricky to grasp an understanding for it – especially when most of the answers were scientific and there was still much to discover.

I heard Riddel move behind me, and with the rustle of fabric, I realised she was changing into her own dress – one that was a stark contrast to my own.

It had a high neckline, wrapping around her neck perfectly. It was a rich purple, almost black, velvet. The sleeves were long, and the only sign of a lighter colour was a little frill at the hem of her gown. She looked sombre now, her eyes meeting mine when I turned to her. “You really don’t know?”

“Why would I?”

Riddel opened her mouth but hesitated. “Your family... never mind.” She shook her head quickly and gave me no chance to ask her to elaborate. Instead, she answered my previous question. “Demons are descended of old magic. The magic is said to have died out many years ago, centuries ago, but we still have features that distinguish us from humans.” She tapped close to her eyes. “For me, it is my eye colour. For others, it might

be their hair. We have heightened strength and speed in comparison to humans, but that is all that separates us physically. Mutated demons are normal until they are injected with a type of potion – or poison.”

“It is not something demons have done to themselves?” I said, trying not to back down when she shot me a glare.

Her gaze was piercing as she moved to stand in front of me again, her hands resting on my shoulders. “The mutation destroys lives. Many have died from having the wrong dosage – parents pass down their mutations to their children.”

I knew that it can destroy lives. I'd seen it.

“Would an example be the ink by Jesper’s eye?”

“Exactly.” She nodded firmly and let me go. I realised then that she was not angry at me for asking, more at the situation that the demons were in. “The mutators steal people from the island and test on them. They have done for years.”

I stared at her. “Do the mutations hurt?”

“You would have to ask someone that yourself. I have no idea.”

It was obvious by how tense she was that it pained her to speak of the subject as she turned away, her hands brushing imaginary creases out of her gown.

I didn’t apologise for my words. I had every right to know what their life was like after they had drugged me and dragged me across the sea.

However, feeling her discomfort, I cleared my throat and moved towards the door. “Are we going now?”

Riddel stared at me, and I kept my hand wrapped around the door handle, meeting her gaze. I would not let her intimidate me.

“You should not ask Jesper about the mutations,” she said carefully, after a moment.

“Why?” the question left my lips immediately. I wanted to know. She seemed protective of him at that moment.

Her jaw clenched, and I could see she was fighting with herself not to snap, only because I had done so myself many times. “Because it will upset him... and he will only try to hurt you in response – even if he won’t mean it.”

“Just because he’s upset, it doesn’t excuse any bad behaviour from him.”

“You’re both impossible!” Riddel huffed and waved a hand. “Open the door, let’s go. You two idiots can be reunited.”

I narrowed my eyes at her insult, but she had already pushed past to open the door herself, her hand placed over mine on the handle.

She gave me no chance to argue with her as she walked down the corridor, lit by candles since it was dark outside as it approached the early evening.

“I’m not an idiot!” I called after her, wanting the last word as I struggled to keep up.

The manor was still hard to navigate, even after being there for a few days. Even in the day, it was dark inside due to the deepest reds and browns that decorated the walls. Despite this, it was well-furnished and paintings from famous artists over the kingdoms decorated the rooms.

Jesper admitted he was an art collector. I realised it was probably because he had not had many possessions as a child – especially not expensive ones. *I was the same.*

But still, the place did not feel lived in. I had snooped around the manor into rooms I should never have seen, but many of them were empty. I even wandered into Jesper’s chambers one afternoon, and I knew it was his because of the large plush cushion for Arka to one side of the sizeable canopy bed. He had few belongings, his cane hung off the end of the bed and apart from a few tattered books, everything else was new clothes. I wondered if, perhaps, Jesper did not intend to stay there forever.

It did make sense, after all, Jesper continued to remind me that he had not been there long and that he was used to being on a ship.

As we made our way down the staircase, I examined the painting that I decided was my favourite in his collection.

It was of the sea on a calm morning. I had always seen very violent storms in paintings of the sea, or depictions of a port, never one that conveyed a serene ocean. I did not recognise the painter’s signature; it was only two letters – *EM*. Jesper had merely smirked when I asked what the name was, and he told me he would tell me one day. It made me suspicious.

Was he the artist? Surely not. He did not strike me as a painter. Nor were his initials anything close to an E or M.

Another thing I noticed in the dreary manor was the lack of staff. There were only a few maids, a cook, and a butler. Even as we arrived at the

dining room doors, I had not seen anyone wandering about.

Riddel opened the doors, and I stepped inside. The dining room was not as large as the one in the castle, but it felt comfortable. There were enough chairs at the table for twelve people, but I had never seen more than three sit at it.

I was growing more impatient to gain an answer to my burning question.

As Arka bounded over to me, I grinned, and ran my fingers through the wolf's fur as he licked my other hand. He was much like a big puppy – a tamed beast. I dared to glance up at his owner, smirking to myself, wondering if anyone would be able to tame the beast that was Jesperin Utara.

Jesper was already seated at the head of the table, his face unreadable and emotionless as he ran his eyes up and down my form. The intensity of his gaze filled me with a yearning no one else had unlocked.

Calm down, Cat. Control yourself.

There was a hunger in his stare that made my knees want to buckle.

“How do you like your gown, Kitty Cat? You look beautiful in pink. Well, I take that back. You look beautiful in any colour – but you look especially stunning this evening,” he said, his words confident, leaving no room for argument or to believe he was joking.

I was surprised by his sincerity.

“It's much better than the first monstrosity you offered me,” I remarked and moved towards the table, noticing it was only set for two.

“Someone had to make that dress, you know. Not everyone has a nice lavish life in a castle.” Jesper snorted and nodded to Riddel, who closed the doors.

I tensed up at his insinuation and sat down with a small huff. “I know that. Of course, I do. Why is Riddel not joining us – she was dressed up too?”

“Riddel is meeting with someone for me,” Jesper retorted. “Since I am busy entertaining you this evening.”

“You really didn't have to – I could entertain myself,” I said flatly, eyeing the plates of food that were being uncovered for us by one of the maids, who then swiftly left when Jesper waved his hand.

Then the two of us were completely alone.

Jesper's straight, dark eyebrow raised, and he smirked. He tapped his lip with his finger, and I followed the movement. "How would you do that? I'm dying to know. In fact, you could let me watch next time you decide to."

I realised how he had twisted my words, and I gripped my hands in my lap to stop myself from leaping over to attack him.

The man had a silver tongue. The last few days had been a test of self-restraint, as he'd done everything in his power to annoy me when we spoke. He was a crude man, who made jokes about sex and violence without so much as batting an eyelash.

I ignored him and placed some meat on my plate – it was not chicken, nor any animal I'd heard of in Crimone. Jesper told me that, due to not having as many farms on the island, they had to make do with what they could import or what animals lived there. I guessed it was some kind of fish but did not care much about what it was – as long as it filled me up.

What we ate didn't matter, for I was not a fussy eater. I'd learnt from a young age to eat what I was given. Still, I hid my smile as I noticed a bowl of carrots that had been caramelised. It was one of my new favourites and something I'd only had on the island.

"Are you ever going to tell me what it is I am here for? As much as your hospitality has been impeccable, I would like to return to my home," I said to him after filling my plate.

"It doesn't feel like your home though, does it?" Jesper asked me boldly, still not having served himself anything to eat.

My heart sped up at his words. How was this man able to see so far into my inner thoughts when he had known me for mere days? It was as though he knew everything I hated, knew what annoyed me just enough before I burst with anger, or how uncomfortable I felt in certain situations.

I cleared my throat. "I don't know what you're talking about, and stop answering my questions with more questions."

Jesper chuckled low, still lazing in his chair as he gripped his goblet filled with sweet red wine, taking a sip. "Fine. I need you to agree to my proposal."

"You won't give that up?" I asked, exasperated, "I'm not interested in you."

"Quite frankly, I don't care, Kitty Cat." Jesper rolled his eyes. "As much as your opinion is important, I need to be welcomed into your kingdom –

and you're my ticket in."

"Tell me what you're looking for, and then I might agree." I narrowed my eyes at the man, watching him take a long sip from his goblet, and he licked his red lips, my eyes following the movement as they had when we'd had breakfast.

Focus, Cat.

I took a bite of my dinner, not able to savour it, as he spoke again. "I'm looking for a cure."

"A cure?"

"For the mutation."

I nearly choked on my mouthful, taking large gulp of wine to swallow it. Then I sat forward, my food forgotten.

He chuckled at my response and sat forward too, slower than I had. "Don't look so surprised, Queenie. A lot of people are looking for the same thing as me."

"Do you know if it's in Crimone? For certain?" I asked, a little too fast. I inwardly scolded myself for not being calmer in my approach – but this was the first I'd heard of a cure, and I needed to know if he was teasing me or not.

If there was a cure, I needed it.

Jesper's jaw moved, and he slowly brushed his fingers across the table until he brushed the tips against the side of my hand. "Yes, for certain. Which is why I *need* you, Kitty Cat. You won't even know I'm there." He smirked, eyes flicking up to mine in delight. "Well, apart from if you want to spend time with me."

"Absolutely not," I hissed, surprising myself by not pulling my hand away. His touch was so warm and inviting.

Jesper took this as his chance to continue brushing his fingers over my skin. "Well, it's your choice – but I'll have you know, I'm quite a catch," Jesper teased but did not go into further detail about the location of the cure or what exactly it was.

However, it was news. Eriel would be sent in search of information when I returned.

I pulled my hand back when he tried to trail his fingers up to my wrist and picked up my cutlery once more. I spoke evenly, "If I agree, you need to sign a contract. If you do not abide by it, I will have you arrested as a criminal – lord or no lord."

Jesper wheezed, amused. The man ran his large hand through his hair, and I let my eyes flicker to his strong bicep as he did so. “I already made you an oath – that’s a binding contract, surely?”

“I have not had time to look into your oath.” I narrowed my eyes at him. “Especially since I was rudely stolen away from my home.”

Jesper scoffed, and he shrugged his broad shoulders. “I’ll sign whatever you want me to as long as I get you to say yes.”

Having a fake arrangement with Jesper would ease the competition within the court. I’d also get to keep an eye on the mysterious man that seemed to know my secrets. I couldn’t believe I was even contemplating the idea.

Jesper smiled slyly, as if able to read my thoughts.

I cleared my throat in annoyance. “Fine,” I grumbled, “but you will sign something when we return. You’ll also promise to stop intercepting my kingdom’s trade with Wertheria.”

“Can do, Kitty Cat. That was only to get your attention anyway.”

“There were so many other ways to get my attention. Could you not have just written me a letter?” I sighed, exasperated.

Jesper shrugged again. “I like to keep things interesting.”

How the man was in charge of the island still astounded me.

“Should I be worried?” I let out before I was able to stop myself. His reputation as The Fox had me wanting to keep him close – he was a cunning man, and it would be better for him to be on my side. That was all.

Yet, there was something that had my stomach filling with butterflies – I was probably nervous I was wrong. *I should just leave and never think of him again.*

Jesper’s stare settled on my face, and I could feel him studying me. “No. I am not after you, Queenie. Not unless you’re involved in the mutations.”

I shook my head furiously at his suggestion, the very idea making my blood boil. “Do not even suggest such a thing—”

He laughed, cutting me off. I glared at him as he placed a hand on his stomach and threw his head back. “You are so easy to annoy. Have you no friends that tease you? What about your dashing advisor?”

I could not let him know that I didn’t. I merely scoffed at his question and turned my gaze back to the plate in front of me, less interested in the food – which was a shame, as everything smelt incredible

“I will take that as a no, then,” Jesper chuckled, calming down as he leaned to serve himself some food as well. Out of the corner of my eye, I noticed him piling his plate high with something from each dish. He was a well-built man, and I recalled how much he had enjoyed the breakfast in the castle. It must be hard to maintain such a physique.

I liked people that enjoyed and appreciate the effort that went into the food. *He would be the perfect partner for me if he were not so insufferable.*

“Do you not like any of the dishes?” Jesper asked after a moment of peace, having taken a few mouthfuls himself.

“It’s wonderful, actually,” I told him, pushing around a large roast potato with my fork.

Jesper raised his eyebrow in disbelief. “Then why are you pushing it around as if it’s the worst thing to ever grace your gaze?”

“No, that’s you,” I muttered, gaining a sniff from the man. “I was just thinking, is all.”

“Clearly, although as much as your thoughts are important, you need to make sure you eat enough to sustain them. I can’t have my future wife not eating enough. No, that just would not do at all.” Jesper tutted and shook his head. He leaned forward and placed a few more carrots on my plate, the smell enough to entice me into cutting one up to put in my mouth.

The flavour was just as fresh as I remembered from the other nights, and I swallowed happily. I was still not sure if he was being sincere, but I’d started to learn how to differentiate over the last few days.

“Accept me,” Jesper stated after I had eaten a few more rushed mouthfuls, not wanting to lose my appetite again before I could finish the divine food.

I swallowed harshly, the feeling scratching my throat. “Instead of demanding, you should ask me nicely.”

“I already tried that twice, and you said no,” Jesper sighed, dejectedly. “I’m trying a different way now. I told you – I’m out of options, Queenie.”

“Oh, so I’m the last resort.” I bit down on my lip and sat back in the wooden chair, surprised at how comfortable it was just with a cushion beneath me.

Jesper chuckled low, and I watched the man tap his fingers on the table, his smile revealing dimples. The way the candlelight flickered across his pale skin showed that he had a light glitter on his high cheekbones.

He spoke a moment later, voice low, as his eyes flickered to mine so he could hold my gaze. “That is not true – you are the only person I would ever make an oath for, Kitty Cat. The only woman I’d want to tie myself to for the rest of my life– so much so – that I would die if any harm came to you. If it is love you are worried about, we will learn to love one another. And as for the other vows, I can swear to all of them. Loyalty? Certainly. Honour? Do I not do that already? Cherish? I shall make sure that you know you are loved every single day.”

“That’s...” I felt oddly satisfied at his answer, a heat running throughout my body that I could not describe. Was I just happy that a handsome man was showing such interest? Or did my body really want me to believe in his words? No one had ever made me such promises before.

“Flattering, isn’t it? I’m rather good at that,” Jesper teased, and he nodded to my plate. “Now eat up. We’re going out tomorrow and then we will be returning to Crimone the day after.”

“Listen here, your pretty words matter little for we will not be truly getting married even if I do accept you,” I established, shaking my head at his behaviour. Even if it had pleased me.

“If you say so, Kitty Cat. But you liked my pretty words, your face tells me so.”

I brushed his teasing aside and asked, “I thought you had some business here? Riddel is meeting someone important, isn’t she?”

“She has it under control. It is just about establishing some rules for trade here – buckling down on those who think selling our kind is allowed.” Jesper tutted, his hand going to Arka to stroke his hand over the wolf’s head. “Specifically, there is a rather prickly baron who does not like me. Nor will he leave the island and return to Crimone as I wish he would.”

I could not bite back the response, “Do you not deal with that sort of thing yourself?”

“Not if I can help it – my main priority is the cure. Riddel is a good second in command. My left hand, if you will.”

“Why is she not the right?”

“Well, because that would be a boring thing to call her – Riddy is more special than a well-known title.”

It made me think of Eriel and how he managed so much for me. I knew I was lucky – even if I didn’t show him very often. I’d often referred to him

as my right hand, but he was much more than that.

We continued eating in silence. Jesper was eating a hearty amount, his eyes flickering up every so often, still awaiting my reply.

“I will accept your *fake* proposal. On one condition,” I announced, standing from my seat, and placing the napkin on the table.

My words amused him – his eyes sparkling with mischief as he leaned on his elbows, raising a finger. “Alright, what it is, Kitty Cat?”

“You will tell me about the mutations. I want to hear everything you know from that silver tongue of yours.”

Chapter Nine



Jesper's face fell when I spoke, and for a moment, my stomach dropped. Had I been too unkind? Did I care that much about his opinion?

No. I had to get the answers I needed, and I did not have to take into account his feelings – he was using me, so I would use him.

"Did you not hear me? You must not be that desperate then." I sighed pensively when he did not reply.

His hand reached out, and he grabbed my wrist when I went to leave the table. I glanced down at my arm to where he was holding me.

"I'll tell you." His words were simple. It was evident just how much he needed the arrangement.

I could make this work for myself. I slowly lowered myself back in the seat and pulled my wrist free of his grasp. "Go on then."

"You really are a pain in the ass," Jesper grumbled before standing up. He started to pace back and forth beside his chair, and I raised an eyebrow as the tall man scratched his head.

"Takes one to know one." I smirked and winked when his head snapped in my direction.

"Where do I even start? Is there something specific you want to know, Queenie?"

I tapped my cheek when I spoke, just below my eye where the ink sat on his face. When he still didn't catch on, I said, "Does it hurt?"

“Are you concerned for me?” Jesper grinned, but when I did not smile, he sighed. “Not often – but that’s because I was born with it. Born a little freak with a nasty tattoo by his eye.” His words were harsh, and he could not meet my gaze as he stared ahead of him, arms folded across his chest.

I finally grasped what Riddel meant about his attitude around the topic.

However, I would not stop.

When I frowned at Jesper’s words, Arka moved to nudge his head against my hand, so I ran my fingers through his soft fur. “Who said that?”

“My mother,” he said without doubt, not leaving further room for questioning. “Or so my father told me. The mutations hurt if they are from testing, but it is less so when you are born with them. We don’t know exactly what demons are being injected with, but it’s a black poison – made predominantly with some kind of foul magic.”

“Foul magic...” I repeated, trying to imagine what it might look like in my head. Images were easier to understand for me. “But magic doesn’t exist–”

“Come now, anything is possible. But that’s all I know about the magic side of things, perhaps there will be a book later that can go into detail.” Jesper chuckled, before continuing, “The poison adds to a demon’s body. It blends with their blood and makes excruciating changes to their appearance.”

“Is it just demons?” I already knew the answer to that, but I would not share it with him. The memory was too horrific to even bring forward. Arka put his head in my lap as if sensing my discomfort surrounding the topic.

“From what I know, yes.” Jesper nodded, some hair falling in front of his eyes, and he left it to hang there. I was itching to brush it back for him. “That is why you see some demons with horns, some with pink or green skin – others with marks like mine. They are all made up of poisonous magic.”

“So can the cure can get rid of the poison?”

Jesper shook his head firmly. “No, it neutralises it. It would stop any mutated demon passing on their mutation but does not take their mutation away. Or that’s what I have been able to gather anyway.”

“How do you know all this? There are no books on it – I checked,” I told him seriously. I narrowed my eyes suspiciously. “Or are there?”

“No books, Kitty Cat.” Jesper shook his head with a chuckle. I watched him scratch his chin as he resumed, “Just research – a lot of hands-on research. There were some papers written when the mutations first started happening, and I went in search of them with my father. He was obsessed with finding a cure after I was born, and it was passed to me.”

“The mutations have been happening for some time then,” I stated.

“It was not as known about when it first started – my father was one of the first. It only started becoming popular again recently – although I have no idea why.”

The ink by his eye seemed to shimmer as he mentioned the mutations, but I did not ask him about it again. “Do you have the papers?” I asked, after a moment of blatant staring.

“They were stolen from me when I first arrived on the island after my father passed– some pickpocket thought he got lucky and found some crina notes.” Jesper sighed. “I searched everywhere for them, but I’m assuming they were burnt when he found out it couldn’t buy him anything.”

My heart sank. Those papers might have revealed the information I needed. I chewed my lip, looking back down at my empty plate and then at the sleepy wolf in my lap.

“Why are you so desperate for these answers?” His voice interrupted my disappointment, and I rolled my eyes.

“I ask the questions here, not you,” I replied. He snickered, but I spoke again, “Do you remember what those papers said?”

“I was around fifteen when they were stolen – of course, I don’t remember all of it. I’m talented but not *that* talented, Queenie.” Jesper chuckled, and he shrugged, placing his hand on the table by my plate.

It felt quite domestic in that situation, him leaning against the table, Arka’s snoring head resting in my lap.

It was comfortable.

“I do remember that it detailed some names. I’m investigating those people myself. The lord that Riddel overheard plotting against you – he’s one of them.”

Lord Josephite. “And the others?” *I sounded so desperate.*

“All in good time, Queenie. Now, can I interest you in dessert?” I rolled my eyes and shook my head, and he smirked. “That’s a shame. How about something... sweet?”

“You’re so...”

“Handsome?” he interrupted.

“I was going to say bothersome.”

“Who is calling my darling nephew bothersome?” a woman’s voice interrupted, and my head snapped towards the door. It was not one I recognised, and I instantly felt outnumbered.

The woman was reasonably old – I would have guessed over sixty. Her hair was littered with more grey than red, and the wrinkles on her pale skin were evident. She was leaning on a cane, hobbling a little as she walked further into the room. I swallowed thickly when I noticed her dark eyes cast over me, behind her round spectacles, and I stood up on instinct.

“Aunt, what a pleasant surprise – you did not tell me you were visiting.” Jesper’s smile was wide, and he brushed a hand down my arm before moving from my side. He walked towards the woman and placed his hands on her shoulders, kissing both her cheeks.

The woman chuckled fondly, her hand coming up to rest on his cheek. She was tiny in comparison to the large man. “I had a spare couple of days since my students are on holiday and decided to come see my favourite nephew.”

“Your *only* nephew, Aunt.” Jesper laughed jovially and wrapped his arm around her shoulders as he moved to guide her towards the table. His eyes settled on mine, and he winked. I wondered what had him so amused, but then he spoke, “Aunt Lorelai, this is my fiancée, Queen Catania of Crimone. Cat, this is my dearest aunt – Lorelai Riadane. She is the headmistress of the Wister Academy in Wertheria.”

I felt her look me up and down, and I clenched my hands into fists at my sides. My nails dug into my palms as I waited to see what she would say. She stared at me for a moment longer, scrutinising me, before a warm smile lit up her features. “It is lovely to meet you, Your Majesty. My nephew has spoken about you a great deal in his letters.”

As Jesper guided her to the table, I raised an eyebrow at him. “Letters?”

Jesper smirked at me as he pulled out her chair. It was his aunt that spoke, “He writes to me at the end of every week, you see. I’m an old lady, and he is the last member of my family I care about.”

She must be from his mother’s side. I could not see any defining demon traits and realised that perhaps it was not just Jesper that disliked his

mother. Lorelai took a seat opposite me, and Jesper disappeared for a moment to fetch her a plate himself.

Not very lord-like.

“I have not seen him so dutiful before,” I told her. It would be rude not to address her, even if I were royalty.

“He is a good boy, really. Had a tough childhood poor thing. I only wish I had known about him sooner.” His aunt sighed and sat straight in her chair. She was a poised woman and reminded me of a cat with her graceful movements as she poured herself some wine. When I did not reply, she let out a low chuckle. “His mother, my sister, never told me about him. He was the one that reached out to me a few years ago by writing to me at the academy.”

My lips twitched a little. “I have heard a lot about the Wister Academy. I always wanted to go, but my parents would never have allowed it.”

“It is quite far from your home, Majesty,” Lorelai mused before glancing at the door and then back to me. It felt strange to be talking to someone related to Jesper – and someone he clearly favoured so highly. “How did your engagement come about?”

I took in a sharp breath as I thought of what to say. “I’m not really sure.”

The woman raised a thin eyebrow. “Jesperin is not forcing you into it, is he? I will have a word with him if so. I’ll not have him bullying people into doing as he pleases. I thought I’d taught him better than that.”

“Oh, no,” I said quickly, not wanting to alienate the woman. He and I had come to an agreement after all, and I was just trying to pick at his character because he wouldn’t give me what I wanted. “I was just... teasing.”

“Teasing? Well, I am glad to hear it. He could do with someone at his side.” Lorelai chuckled, and she placed her napkin on her lap – just as Jesper returned.

“How are two of my favourite women getting along?” Jesper said, setting the plate down with the cutlery. He flashed Lorelai an enchanting smile before sitting down in his seat again.

“Wonderfully, darling boy. Can you tell me how this all came about? Your fiancée was just about to answer.”

I focused my eyes on the woman as she turned the question to him. I knew we were not about to get out of answering, and I couldn’t leave it to

him to reply, either.

“He visited Crimone a while ago, and that is when we first met,” I explained, making something up on the spot.

Lorelai stared at me, processing my words, and I wondered if she had worked out my lie. “Oh yes, you did go to Crimone a couple of months ago, Jesper.”

Months ago?

I raised a brow as Jesper looked smug as he looked at me. “I did, Aunt.”

“You were meant to be visiting the royal family when you were there—”

“You were?” I interrupted, not caring if it was rude. That was something that he had not shared with me. A few months ago, my parents were fine. I wondered if he had met them before.

If that was the case, did he see anything he shouldn't have?

Jesper chuckled. “I met the royal family briefly. Your parents were quite keen on making arrangements with me about the island.”

“So, they always knew you were going to take over?” I tried not to sound stunned, but my voice became higher as I finished the question.

Jesper’s eyes twinkled as he caught on to this, and I swallowed hard at his nod. “They did – they never told you? I would have thought as their *only* heir that they would have kept you informed.”

His emphasis on the word made my shoulders tense. My mind drifted back to the name he had used the other day – *Cate*.

“Now, now, you’ve made her uneasy. If she does not wish to share that at the dinner table, then it is completely alright. I thought I taught you had better manners than that, Jesper,” Lorelai scolded after she finished her mouthful, wiping the corners of her mouth with her napkin. “Royals all have their secrets, and it is not polite to push them to tell us. I know that from experience.”

“Yes, Aunt.” Jesper sighed, but a smile was playing on his lips. When his golden gaze trailed back to mine, it made me shudder. He *did* know something.

The conversation was certainly not over.



“Play something for us, Jesper. I have missed listening to your solos.”

I nearly choked on the sip of my wine, trying to savour my second glass of the evening, not wanting to drink too much. Hangovers were entirely unpleasant – and I didn’t fancy being on a boat with one. “Pardon? What is Jesper playing?”

Lorelai looked between the two of us, before she pointed the end of her cane at Jesper. “Are you telling me you haven’t played your violin for Her Majesty?”

Jesper’s eyes twinkled as he pushed the cane away from his face. He spoke calmly, “She never asked me to, Aunt.”

“Only because you never told me you could play, fool,” I coughed, covering up the insult. While I did not care if he heard me call him as such, I did not want to make a bad impression on his aunt.

She was the only family left that he cared about. Even if I didn’t like him – I had to behave for the sake of our agreement.

“Well, that just isn’t acceptable. My Jesper has a wonderful talent for the instrument – go on, Nephew. Fetch it from wherever you have hidden it away.”

Jesper grumbled like a young boy being told what to do, “It’s not hidden, it’s just in my room.”

I raised an eyebrow as I watched Jesper rise from his seat, disappearing from the room. We had retired to the parlour in the manor – which was smaller than any parlour I had seen before.

But it felt cosy. The walls were decorated with a deep red wallpaper, a black elaborate pattern across it. The fireplace was large, and I had caught Jesper taking any opportunity he could to have a poke at the fire.

There were two old, but comfortable, yellow settees – which his aunt and I occupied. The table in the centre was a dark wood and had an obnoxious centrepiece of a bust of someone I didn't recognise. Someone had broken the head and placed some fruit and flowers in it.

Lorelai cleared her throat to catch my attention. "Child, may I be frank with you?"

Had she not already done so all evening?

I nodded slowly. "Of course."

"What do you know of The Fourth Kingdom?"

The question left me breathless and confused. It was not what I had been expecting the older woman to say. The wrinkles by her eyes became more prominent as she grinned, reminding me of a walnut.

Lorelai continued, "I only ask, because my nephew has become quite obsessed with it since the revelation of the mutated demons."

I should not have been surprised that he would tell her everything – he clearly trusted the woman. I cleared my throat and reached forward to help myself to a custard tart and two strawberry macaroons. It was a distraction, of course, to gain some time to think about what I would reveal.

Just because Jesper trusted her did not mean I had to.

Not to mention the sweet treats were just sitting there, staring at me – waiting to be consumed. It would be a crime not to fill my plate. They smelt rich and I wondered how long they had been out of the oven for, since they were the perfect colour.

After placing a whole macaroon in my mouth and taking my time to finish it, I responded, "I know that we need to be careful of them, but that is all. Does the King of Wertheria know more than he has been sharing?"

"You are quick to accuse, Majesty," Lorelai commented, though her tone was not judgemental. *However, I did feel scolded.* "From what I gather, there have been some new developments. While most of the new discoveries come from the sea or the ports, just a few days ago someone was taken prisoner in the capital."

A prisoner? "What kind of prisoner?"

"A woman – maybe a demon lady from The Fourth Kingdom. She was caught trying to sneak into Wister Academy along with another unidentified person."

I frowned as I processed the new information. “What could they have wanted in there?”

“Well, there are plenty of records in the library. A famous restricted section too. But no, the important thing was not what, but *who*.”

They were looking for someone. What kind of person could be so special they had people chasing after them like that?

There was no chance for me to question her further.

“Right, what song would you like to hear, Aunt?” Jesper asked as he returned. Before Lorelai could reply, Jesper held up a hand. “I don’t care actually – I’ll play my favourite.”

“You insolent boy,” Lorelai tutted, although affectionately.

Jesper hooked the violin under his chin, his long fingers expertly moving to check the fine instrument was in tune. I could tell he took care of it – for it almost looked as good as new.

After a few accidental notes, Jesper started to play a familiar tune. It was lively and he tapped his foot on the floor to keep himself in time. I sat forward, as though in a trance, and watched how he swayed along to the music.

Half lidded eyes met mine and his lips formed a beautiful smile as he hummed along quietly.

“Have you heard this song before?” Lorelai asked, her hand moving along with the rhythm, her head moving from side-to-side.

“My friend’s mother, Lady Swan, used to sing this at court – she was a lady-in-waiting to Queen Melisa.”

Eriel could sing it too, although he didn’t do so often. It was painful for him – to sing the song his mother had loved so much but would no longer sing.

Jesper continued to play, but was able to ask, “Does she still sing? Perhaps the two of us could do a duet,” he joked. *Was he hoping to make me jealous?*

He twirled around, sitting on the arm of the settee, beside me.

He was talented, I would give him that.

Not once had he faltered when playing the difficult piece. It was a long song; if not close to ten minutes.

“Lady Swan lives elsewhere now – in a convent in Dalvesta. It was... well, for the best, some might say.”

“A convent?” Lorelai frowned. “Whatever for?”

For some reason, I couldn't help but continue to talk. Maybe it was the relaxed atmosphere.

"Her husband put her there. Supposedly, she had an affair with another man and rather than face the shame of it, he sent her off to be a nun. My friend and his brother have not seen their mother since."

Jesper pressed on, "Well, did she have the affair?"

"Who knows." I shrugged. "But she was young – I think she was only sixteen when she had the twins. It wouldn't surprise me if she had run off with someone else."

The previous Lord Swan was certainly a monster. Eriel had told me as such himself. I'd be putting in a law to ban such young marriages as soon as I could.

"You have a very pessimistic view of the world, Kitty Cat," Jesper noted. "I think it sounds rather romantic, running off with someone else when you're married."

I scoffed in displeasure. "If you even look at another person whilst you're married to me, I'll make sure face the worst kinds of torture."

"Here, here!" Lorelai teasingly agreed – helping herself to a slice of caramel cake.

Thankfully, Jesper didn't press me on my slip up of insinuating we may marry one day. Instead, he leaned close to my face, smirking. "I wouldn't dare, my sweet. For I only have eyes for My Queen."

"Flirt," I muttered.

"You wouldn't have me any other way."

Lorelai cleared her throat, hiding her amusement behind a mouthful of cake. "I think I'll retire to my room; the journey was long and I leave soon."

"Of course, goodnight, Aunt. Sleep well."

"Yes, sleep well," I agreed, wanting to be polite to the woman.

We both watched her take her plate, leaning on her cane to leave the room. She bid us both goodnight, muttering to herself about young lovers.

Then, we were all alone.

"Now come here, I'll teach you how to play something," Jesper rose from the settee and stopped playing. He gestured for me to join him by crooking his finger.

I rolled my eyes but walked over to him regardless. "Is this just an excuse to touch me?"

Jesper gasped dramatically, holding a hand to his chest. “Kitty Cat, you’re so hurtful.”

“And right.”

“Well, yes, on this occasion,” he teased and took my hand, twirling me under his arm until my back was pressed against his chest. “But I don’t hear you arguing about the matter, so I’ll take that as you would also like to be pressed against me.”

I positioned my arms so I could take his prized violin and bow, ignoring his words for I knew he’d suss out any lie I tried to spin for him.

His chest was warm against my back, and I swallowed thickly when his hand brushed under my chin to adjust it for me. His sparkling eyes met mine for a moment and he tapped my chin when he was satisfied. “There we are, now you’ve got perfect form.”

“What song are you going to teach me then?” I asked, dragging the bow over the strings – wincing at the awful sound I created.

Jesper smirked and he pressed a feather-light kiss to my temple. The simple act was enough to make my cheeks feel hot and my hands grip the instrument tighter. “I think we’ll just start with the simple ‘sparkle sparkle big moon’ since I don’t think you can handle more than that.”

I scowled at the insulting famous nursery rhyme and grumpily nudged his chest with my elbow. “Who is the hurtful one now?”

“Still you, my sweet” Jesper sang, his hands resting over both of mine as he guided me into playing the simple song.

I’m not sure I could recall much of it after that moment... aside from the way his hot hands felt against me, and the way his large body enveloped mine. If I was a better woman, I would have stopped him.

But I enjoyed the simple intimacy of it all far too much.

Chapter Ten



“Where did you say we were going?” I asked, wrinkling my nose as we walked into a dark building, just outside of one of the local taverns. The place had boarded up windows and smelt strongly of wine and sweat.

Riddel answered from behind, shutting the door behind her. “It is the home of a renowned artist.”

“I thought you might like to meet the painter of that piece of art you so love to stare at in the manor. Don’t think I haven’t seen you, Kitty Cat.”

He’s been keeping an even closer eye on me than I could have thought.

A sweet orange scent filled my nose, and I glanced down at the handkerchief with a fox embroidered on it being wafted in front of my face. “Use this, Queenie.”

“Why does it smell like that?” Despite my question, I took the burgundy fabric and kept it by my nose.

“Like what?”

“Like... oh...” I realised it smelt just like him, and I had been too slow to recognise it. I refused to meet his gaze when he looked over his shoulder to me. “Never mind.”

His chuckle was covered by the sounds of loud chatter and Jesper turned sharply down a set of stairs, his maroon cape flying after him. It was pinned to one shoulder and revealed the back of his dark, and simple, shirt and trousers he wore beneath. I peered down after him, stopping suddenly.

While it was not pitch black, the amber and red hues that were at the bottom of the staircase did not fill me with comfort. The chatter grew louder as Jesper joined the people below, his name being called by a few of them.

Riddel gave my shoulder a nudge. “Are you a scaredy cat?”

I rolled my eyes, nudging her hand off me and taking the first step. The swirled patterned material of my overcoat was lifted so I would not trip on it, the vivid shade of pink had been picked out specifically by Jesper. The black cotton trousers and leather boots had been my choice – as I found them much easier than a gown and heeled shoes.

As we approached the bottom of the staircase, I walked directly to Jesper as I spotted him speaking to someone.

The room was lit with candles, the stone floor and walls left it feeling damp and cold. The place was covered with people sitting on stools in front of large canvases. In the centre, sat a woman who lay practically bare on an old worn settee. She had only a layer of blue silk draped around her body.

How scandalous. But also, how interesting to be painting someone so intimately.

I shivered as a breeze came down from the staircase, glancing at the others in the room who had poked their heads around their canvases when I entered.

As they should. I am their queen after all, they should pay attention to me. Even if they don’t know who I am yet.

“Jesper is a patron of the artist here,” Riddel explained, appearing behind me again and handing over a glass of wine. I stared at the slightly dirty glass, sniffing the cheap wine and deciding I didn’t want any.

I’ve had enough cheap things to last me a lifetime.

“Which one is the artist?” I asked, following Riddel’s finger as she pointed to the corner, where a hooded figure was beginning to retreat into the next room. “Why are they hiding in their own home?”

Jesper’s fingers brushed against mine as he joined us. His smile was mischievous as he leaned to whisper, although not that quietly, “They do not wish to show the Queen their face – they fear you may find them ugly.”

“What sort of reasoning is that – they cannot be so hideous, surely?”

“You are in their home, Your Majesty. It would be best to respect their wishes for now,” Riddel reasoned, before falling back to take a seat on a

stool to the side of the room, while Jesper weaved the two of us through the amateur artists.

As I glanced at each of the paintings and sketches, I found myself saying, “It does not seem as though anyone is very good.”

Jesper laughed loudly, his hand squeezing mine. “Oh, Kitty Cat, you are funny.”

“I’m serious – why would you want to be a patron for these people?” I didn’t speak too noisily, but I wasn’t exactly hiding how unimpressed I was as I examined each piece we passed.

Finally, we approached the canvas that belonged to the owner of the building. It was the best of the group. The vibrant colours were already applied, and it was clear that it was more of an abstract piece in comparison to the other poor attempts at capturing the woman.

“You are scrutinising everyone, aren’t you?” Jesper asked in amusement, his finger lightly tapping my nose. “You scrunch your nose up when you’re thinking hard.”

I raised my hand to my nose, shyness washing over me at the idea of the man having caught onto my habit. “What do you like so much about this place?” I hoped to distract him, mainly from the growing heat in my cheeks.

The man shrugged, taking a sip of the wine, not even wincing at the taste.

He grew up poor, remember, Cat? He’s probably used to it.

“I like pretty things – art is pretty.”

“That’s not a real answer, come on, there must be a better reason than that,” I complained.

He ran his tongue over his lip as he let out a chuckle. “You just love to start arguments, don’t you? Well, to keep you happy, I like this place because anyone can be an artist. You only have to take one look around the room to see that there are people from all walks of life in here.”

For the first time, I looked at the people rather than the canvases. He was right – *annoyingly* – and the room was filled with a mixture of people. Young and old, demon and human. Their clothes differed, some wore fine materials and had jewels that decorated their body, the others dressed in worn clothes – their hands were rough and showed signs of hard work.

Yet, they were all there, chatting quietly with one another – laughing. No one *cared*.

“I’m more of a collector than an artist, but I enjoy watching them. I’ll never understand it, but then maybe I just haven’t had the right teacher...” Jesper brushed his thumb over the skin of my wrist, that poked out just between my sleeve and glove. It made me glance down at our still clasped hands. “What do you, say, Kitty Cat? Fancy giving me a private lesson?”

His cheeky smile and the way his eyes sparkled as he waited for my response had me responding before I could think. “Maybe if you behave yourself, Utara. I don’t think you’d make a very good student.”

“I’m not very good at behaving myself, but if you were my teacher, I’d certainly have to pay attention,” Jesper smirked. “Or you could whip me when I don’t obey–”

“My lord!” We were interrupted suddenly when one of the artists called for Jesper.

I went to complain as his hand left mine and his attention changed to the person who had called him. After shifting my jaw in annoyance, I followed close behind, as a few others joined Jesper and the artist.

The man on the stool was dressed in little more than a loose brown shirt and trousers, his greasy blond hair was slicked back into a short ponytail, his tanned skin littered with freckles. When he spoke, I noticed he was missing a few teeth and the others were capped with gold.

For a moment, I was so caught up in assessing him, I didn’t hear Jesper ask a question – only the answer. “Aye, yer Lordship. I’ve not visited fer a few weeks – I’ve been on campaign on Captain Everenden’s ship.”

A member of emissary Serena’s family? Fascinating.

Jesper scratched his sharp chin, staring at the man with a new curiosity. “Where did you go on your campaign, Smith?”

The man, whose surname had to be Smith, replied, “We went to see if we could locate the missing ship ye were talking about last time.”

“I thought I told you not to tell anyone about it?” Jesper tutted, shaking his head, his spikey hair flying around him and falling out of the bun it had been loosely tied into with a ribbon.

“I... well, Captain said he had spoken to ye about it, yer Lordship.”

“Did you find anything, Markus?” One man asked, although the words were muffled as he had a paint brush hanging out of his mouth while he used his finger to smudge some paint on the canvas with his finger.

“No, nothing. Whoever the owner of that trading vessel was did a good job at retrieving it. Disgusting, really.” Markus scowled, shaking his head.

The room was silent as they waited for Jesper to say something. He twisted a ring on his index finger, the simple band was one of his favourites, I’d noticed.

Eventually, Jesper sighed, and the tension that had built snapped – making everyone else relax too. “Silas listens too well when we’re drinking,” he mumbled, glancing at me beneath his lashes, before back at Smith. “You’re sure you found nothing?”

Markus sniffed, his bushy moustache moving as he did so. “Unless ye count empty vials, yer Lordship.”

“Vials, you say?” I added, unable to hide my own interest. “Did your captain say what might have been in them?”

My interruption had Markus shifting uncomfortably on his stool, and he raked his eyes up and down my form. I didn’t cower at the blatant inspection. “No, not that it is any of your concern, *madam*. But we all can guess – it’s that stuff they’re using on demons.”

Just who had Jesper told them I was? The disrespect was hard to endure, but I bit the inside of my cheek, the pain enough to stop me snapping a response at the sailor.

Jesper leaned close to Riddel, whispering to her. I could only assume that it might be to send word to Silas Everenden to find out more. His eyes fell to my face when he was done, and he winked. I merely rolled my eyes.

The unsettling topic of conversation changed quickly when a woman rose to change her pot of water and stopped beside Markus’ canvas.

“You’ve done a wonderful job, Markus!” The woman gushed. “Look at the colour of that silk! The texture is incredible.”

The compliments began to fly in after that, and everyone wanted to look at the canvas.

“Oh, and you’ve captured her expression beautifully.”

“I think you’ve got to buy his next piece, yer Lordship. He’s got quite a talent.”

“Yeah, I bet you could never do anything like that, Jesperin!” One man snickered offensively.

The rude comment caught my attention and I narrowed my eyes at the well-dressed man behind the jibe. *Who was he to use my fiancé’s name like that?*

As I opened my mouth to speak, Riddel placed a hand on my shoulder to prevent me. *She was probably right, there was no need to act out... yet.*

“Baron Angelis. We did not see you there, and did not expect your company this afternoon,” Riddel said evenly. “I thought the two of us agreed you would return to your home in Crimone?”

Oh, so this was the Baron Jesper had mentioned at dinner.

“I’ll return to Crimone soon, that bitch Queen has shown no interest in summoning me to court, so I shall not go just yet. Keep the ugly cow waiting a little longer.” Riddel’s hand tightened on me at the vulgar comment. I wondered which one of us was going to snap first, for her face also screwed up in anger.

There was only so much disrespect I could take.

Jesper smacked his lips together annoyingly. “Well, that’s because you’re just not important enough, Angelis.”

The Baron narrowed deep-set eyes at Jesper as he glanced at him. “You might be higher than me now, Ulara, but remember mere months ago you were no better than dirt beneath my shoe.”

A fire burned in my belly as I went to jump to Jesper’s defence, but he didn’t need my help.

Why was I so keen to jump in to aid him anyway?

Jesper barked out a short laugh as he replied, “How funny you are. It matters little where I started, I own this island now, and you are here at my invitation.”

“I am as much of a patron of this place as you are, Jesperin – but at least I am not afraid to take part,” Baron Angelis sneered. “It’s a pity, I’ve always wanted to compare our work, but I’m sure mine is of a better standard. I was trained by some of the best.”

How dare he ridicule Jesper like that. He was the lord of the island. No matter what the Baron thought.

Jesper rolled his eyes, his usual smile was nowhere to be seen. “If you say so, Angelis.”

“I do say so. Are you afraid to paint a naked wench, is that it?” Baron Angelis asked, crudely. “Because they all look the same, *trust me*. You’ll get the hang of it. Tits and arse and then the rest.”

The man was beginning to get on my last nerve. I’d had enough of insolent men and their need to belittle everyone around them... especially those that had no respect for women.

I slipped out of Riddel's hold before I could think. I grabbed the nearest brush and swiped it in a lively blue paint. Unable to stop, I launched myself at Baron Angelis' canvas and stroked the paint across his art.

"Watch it, you slimy rat," I muttered, just for the man's ears. As I pulled back, I dropped the brush on the floor, the excess paint splattering on the man's garish white shoe. "I don't take kindly to people speaking ill of *my* future husband, nor of my sex."

"Your future husband?" Baron Angelis laughed mockingly. "As if anyone would marry him – a bastard demon boy – and not to mention the son of a pirate."

Why was my heart beating rapidly? Why were my hands beginning to get so clammy?

I clicked my tongue at his impudence. "Don't say I didn't warn you," I replied darkly, turning to re-join the others. The Baron scoffed behind me, kicking over his stool – or someone else's. "She's crazy!"

"What are you planning, Your Majesty?" Riddel questioned quietly, her brow furrowed as she tried to work out my intentions.

I was seething with anger, and my jaw was clenched tightly as I flexed my fingers at my sides. Jesper studied me too, I could feel his gaze grazing every inch of me. "You're going to kill him, aren't you, Queenie?" He asked, his voice light – amused.

"Your Majesty, remember, there is an audience..." Riddel cautioned.

The only answer I gave was, "I warned him."

My movements were swift, and I gave no one much time to do anything as I snatched the blade from Jesper's boot, the same one from the night of the ball.

I wish I could have thrown the knife and landed my target, but I was not that talented. Instead, I threw myself in the Baron's direction, blade raised.

His lip quivered and he tripped as he desperately tried to move out of my path. The man was not much taller than I was, so it made it easy for me to grab the collar of his hideous bright orange overcoat with my free hand, pressing him up against his own canvas.

He reeked of smoke and booze – and up close I could smell he must not use much soap. His face was oily, his pale lips cracked, and even the powdered white wig he wore was on crooked.

"No, not my face, please!" Baron Angelis yelled, trying to shield himself.

“Why? Worried no naked *wenches* will want you?” I snarled as I brought the knife down, slicing the canvas, just beside his ear. The Baron shrieked in fear, his body trembling against mine. I grinned with satisfaction as I tore through the canvas, eventually stepping back when I decided it was enough.

A loud gasp left the man, and he gripped his ear, pulling his hand back to check if I’d cut him or not.

“Perhaps you will think twice before you speak such words against women or the lord of this island,” I said steadily, and I watched him turn to look at the damage done to his work.

I felt satisfied for a moment. That was all that mattered to me.

“You stupid wench!” Baron Angelis hollered, staring at the sabotage, before he turned – swinging his arm at me. I didn’t flinch as he tried to hit me, but the smack resounded against Jesper’s strong back as he appeared before me.

What surprised me most, was Jesper was not angry *with me*.

I had caused trouble for him after all, I would expect him to feel annoyed. But his gaze was soft when he checked me over, his hands briefly resting on my arms. His warm touch snapped me out of the daze I didn’t realise I was in, my actions beginning to catch up with me. “You alright, Kitty Cat? Come on, my sweet, speak to me,” he pleaded.

“I’m... perfectly fine,” I whispered, confused by the sudden affection.

“You should keep your bitch in check, Jesperin,” Baron Angelis hissed.

I barely saw Jesper move, but the Baron went flying through his own canvas and onto his back. The gasps echoed around the room – as did the cries of pain that the Baron released. The fallen man rubbed his lower back, his greasy face screwed up as he yelped when someone offered him a hand to stand up.

I realised, after a moment, that Jesper had shoved him. “Apologize to her now,” Jesper growled, his shoulders shaking with anger.

“She destroyed my work of art – she must answer for it!”

I placed a hand onto Jesper’s back, my boots clicking on the stone as I moved to stand at his side.

Jesper raised an eyebrow, jabbing his finger into the Baron’s chest as Riddel stood behind him. Jesper leered at him, his thin lips forming a wicked grin, one that had my stomach forming a knot. “*Catania* is the Queen of Crimone. She does not have to answer anything.”

The whispers began again, surprise filling the room as they realised who I was.

“At least an apology surely?” Someone else chimed in, the figure cowering behind their artwork when I glared in their direction.

Jesper shook his head firmly. “Why should she apologise? She probably did Baron Angelis a favour – ruining art that shouldn’t be seen.”

The Baron lashed out in Riddel’s hold, Jesper moving back to avoid the spittle flying from his mouth.

Jesperin Ulara never failed to surprise me.

“Why are you so concerned about her, Ulara?” The Baron hissed; his face screwed up. “I thought you wanted the throne for yourself–”

A loud groan filled the room as Jesper punched him in his large stomach. My fiancé leaned over the cowering man. “Maybe at one point in time that was true...” He muttered, and I’m not sure if he meant for me to hear it. “But I made her an oath. If you harm her – I’ll make sure no one will ever take you seriously. You’ll return home with your tail between your legs. Do you understand?”

“Y-yes, Your Lordship.”

Jesper stirred his cape, preventing me from looking at the Baron any longer, and offered his arm for me to take – expectant. “Now, come on, Kitty Cat. We should head back to Ikra manor – I’m taking you back to Crimone tomorrow morning.”



“Do not dawdle for too long, Cat. Jesper will not wait forever.” Riddel stood in the doorway of the small library, acting as my look-out. She was dressed for travelling, adjusting the smart feathered riding hat she wore, as well as the brown leather gloves that matched the rest of her attire.

“I’m just looking for something about that stupid oath,” I grumbled, standing on the ladder so I could reach some higher shelves. That’s usually

where anything suspicious would be hidden.

I had to find it before I left the island.

The oath had been on mind before being dragged to the island – but after our run in with Baron Angelis, I'd been playing Jesper's words over in my mind.

Briefly, I glanced over my shoulder to her. Riddel was playing with a loose bit of green thread that was wrapped around her wrist.

"What's that?"

Immediately, the woman stopped, hiding it under her ruffled sleeve. I could have sworn her cheeks even turned red, although the hat shielded her face. "Nothing."

"Hm, doesn't seem like nothing," I muttered.

She cleared her throat and begrudgingly answered, "Posy gave it to me."

No one came to mind. "Who?"

"You really don't know who she is?" Riddel asked, surprised.

My interest in the conversation dwindled as I ran my fingers over the spines of the books, not taking in many of the words. Eventually, I found something that jogged a memory.

"Oh, you're not reading that again, are you?" I asked, opening my door wider so that a girl could squeeze into the tiny room without being seen by anyone who might tell the King and Queen.

Visitors were strictly off limits – especially if I was being punished. Which I usually was.

The girl grinned and waved the book around before sitting on the edge of my little wooden bed, the whole thing protesting at the weight with a noisy creak. "Stepha and Matthias' story is my favourite, you know that, Cat."

"It's just a silly story."

"Not so!" The girl shook her head adamantly, flicking the book open again to point to her favourite part. "It says here that the oath is still something that can be used today!"

With the memory fresh in my mind, I latched onto the blue leather-bound copy on the shelf and took it down, jumping to the ground when I was far enough down the ladder.

"Found it?" Riddel asked, folding her arms across her chest, leaning against the frame.

I nodded and began to flick through without looking up at her. As soon as I spotted a familiar page, I started to read.

“Used today...” I muttered to myself, my finger following the letters. “Oh, here it is!”

“Read it out then! I want to hear what that old tale has to say about the whole thing.” Riddel chuckled.

Rolling my eyes, I started to read, “Stepha and Matthias were the first to use the oath. Stepha, a demon lady of Demorai Island just off the coast of Crimone, made an oath to King Matthias of Wertheria. She vowed to protect him and his family against The Fourth Kingdom.”

The Fourth Kingdom had always been problematic then.

Abruptly, the book was being taken from my hands, the demon speed annoying since I’d not heard Riddel move. She finished reading the paragraph, “The oath bound her to him, and when the King died in an attack from The Fourth Kingdom, she died a few minutes after him of a broken heart and broken oath. The binding of a pledge means death if the demon does not keep their oath.”

My eyes widened as I took in the information. “So, he wasn’t lying.”

Riddel snapped the book closed and patted my shoulder, moving me aside in the process so she could return the book to the shelf. “You really thought he was?”

Yes. I really did.

“I just... he lies about a lot of things,” I reasoned, shrugging.

Riddel let out a heavy sigh. “He doesn’t lie – he just withholds the truth. Might make him an asshole to be around, but he’s not a liar. At least not to those that matter to him.” The woman climbed down gracefully, her ponytail swinging as she did. “Now come on, let’s get going before he comes in here to lecture you about it himself.”

Jesper had made a vow that would surely end up killing him.

Chapter Eleven



“Thank you, Your Majesty. You have been most generous again. I will find a way to repay you one day.” Serena smiled charmingly as she stood before me, making sure her velvet green cloak was properly tied around her shoulders.

A little smile formed on my lips – it was hard to keep a straight face around such a cheerful woman.

“I do not expect you to do so, but I wouldn’t mind if you took a certain someone off my hands, Serena,” I teased, my eyes flickering to the man who was checking her luggage had been appropriately tied to the carriage.

Eriel was being thorough, and it had not escaped my notice that he was wearing his finest forest green overcoat and had even managed to run a comb through his usually unruly curls.

The woman blushed at the suggestion. “I am not so sure he would thank me for that, Majesty.”

I was shocked at the response but did not need to ask her what she meant, noticing her disappointed sigh. Eriel was good with words – apart from when it came to matters of the heart.

“Safe travels, Serena,” I muttered, bowing my head respectfully.

Eriel offered his hand to the woman, helping her up into the carriage, not able to look her in the eye as he did so. Serena’s cheeks were a darker colour, and I sighed at the impossible situation.

“I hope that we will see one another again soon, Lord Swan,” Serena told him, poking her head out of the gap in the carriage door. She let her hand grip the edge and she brushed it against the side of his.

Eriel coughed in surprise. “As do I, Sere- I mean, Lady Everenden.” He bowed his head to her and backed away until he was at my side. He adjusted the collar of his shirt, looking similar to a lost puppy.

We waved the emissary off, the two of us waiting until the carriage had disappeared completely from the courtyard. Once inside, and when the rest of the farewell party had vanished to take care of their work, I smacked his bicep with my hand. “You’re a foolish man, Eriel.”

He grunted at the sudden hit, and his hand came to rub his arm. “What was that for? You are cruel to me, Cat.”

Rolling my eyes, I slapped a hand on his shoulder. “Serena likes you; you know that. And anyone with half a brain can see that you adore her,” I told him, firmly, hoping to talk some sense into him. “I don’t want you to let this opportunity pass you by.”

Eriel grimaced; his pretty face scrunched in a pain I could relate to. “You know I can’t. I’m needed here, at your side, keeping our secrets safe.”

The way he called them *our* secrets always made me feel guilty. I’d shared my burdens with the man and not thought about what impact it would have on him in the long run.

Shaking my head as we continued to walk towards the study, I let out a sigh, annoyed at myself more than him. “You can’t let me stand in your way, Eriel. I’d be able to cope without you.” *A half-truth.* “You deserve to be happy, and I know that you would keep those secrets long beyond the grave if I asked you to.”

The dark-haired man let out a quiet chuckle. “I know you’re trying to get rid of me, but that’s not the only reason I can’t tell her how I feel,” he admitted sheepishly as we passed through the doors that a guard held open for us. The curtains had been pulled back upon my instruction, the summer sun shining through, the chandeliers glimmering.

I recalled running along the same corridor as a girl, following a child who was giggling in front of me, as she called my name over her shoulder.

Before I could get too caught up in the memory, Eriel continued to speak, “Serena deserves better than a man who would keep secrets from her. She needs someone who can dedicate himself to her.”

I had no words to comfort him.

Squeezing his shoulder carefully, I put my feelings into the action. He gave me a smile that did not meet his eyes and opened the door to my study.

The room was similar to a small library, with any books I may need to consult close by on the bookshelves that surrounded the circular room. It was not very big. The only furniture aside from the shelves was the desk in the centre, with a chair on either side. It had been built in one of the older towers, used as a storage cupboard or bedroom in the past. But I'd taken quite the shine to the space and asked for it to be made into a study.

"I have some bad news, but I thought you would want to recover from your ordeal on the island." Eriel chuckled, taking his usual seat opposite me, and he leaned his arm on the wood – claspings his hands together.

Rolling my eyes at his words, I flopped into my seat with a deep groan. I didn't need the reminder of being 'kidnapped' and spending nearly five days on Demorai Island. Especially not with how Jesper had made it clear he knew something about my past. It was bad enough to think that he knew about my parents, but his other information could be even more dangerous.

The whole ordeal had been incredibly strange. I'd grown closer to the man but come away with an insurmountable number of questions.

"What is this news, then? Break it to me gently," I said, rubbing my temples.

"I have spoken to the Small Council on your behalf, as you requested."

The Small Council was filled with the highest lords and ladies of Crimone. It consisted of the five wealthiest and longest-standing families. Josephite, Olliea, Blackburn, Ridley, and Accora.

"They want you to take on some ladies-in-waiting." Eriel stared at me as he waited for my reaction.

I hated people. I hated them assuming they could hold some sway over me by thrusting their daughters to my side in the expectation that I would find them rich husbands whilst they spy on me for their parents.

What if those women did not want husbands? I was always a believer that people should be able to choose whom they love for themselves, not be forced into it.

Ladies-in-waiting were expected for a queen, and I could assume even more so for one that was a regnant. Although there had never been a

regnant queen in Crimone, there had been several in Dalvesta, and the Small Council and Eriel were following their example.

I should have expected it – but I had been distracted.

Crimone was a reasonably accepting society, but even so, the higher elite thought themselves above such stipulations. They still craved the idea that we should hunt demons down, and that their sons and daughters should marry well. Although they hid these things behind veiled words.

“I do not want them,” I complained, the whine in my voice unbearable to my own ears. “They are probably spoilt, and incredibly selfish, like their families.”

“Much like someone else I know...” Eriel grumbled first. “You do not have much of a choice, you have to appease them somehow.” Eriel tutted, tapping his fingers against the table. “I had to calm them down in some way, they were all furious with the announcement you made on your return.”

The engagement. I had announced it as soon as I had set foot back on Crimonian land – *best to get it over with.*

My advisor continued, “And obviously Lord Josephite’s ego is still sore from what happened with that tall demon lady–”

“Riddel.”

“Yes, Riddel. He claims she should not have been eavesdropping, but when I asked if what she accused him of was true...” Eriel smirked. “He looked sheepish indeed.”

“I will have to keep an eye on him. Find out what is exactly he’s planning.” I frowned and let out a heavy sigh, scratching my chin as I counted out how many daughters these families had. “Invite all the ladies to my chambers this evening after my meal. I’ll inform them of their duties.”

The man looked alarmed. “You’re accepting all of them? Just like that? I thought you would have put up more of a fight.”

I gave him a wicked smile. “I’m fighting in my own way. They think they can send their pretty daughters to spy on me and get nice husbands. Well, I’ll send them off with a lot more than they’ve bargained for. I’ll make them women of the new age – women who will not take any shit from their so-called loving families.”

Eriel’s eyes lit up as he realised what I was insinuating. He laughed proudly. “How incredibly twisted of you, Cat.”



I did not see Jesperin at dinner.

Eriel discovered that Jesper had asked for the food to be sent to his guest chambers and I noticed I was a little disappointed at not being able to have a sparring match with the man.

The fires were lit in the Queen's apartments as I entered them. Despite the warm days in spring, the evenings still had a chill about them. I pulled my silk black robe further around my night gown as I settled in a plush chair by the fire, a glass of wine in my hand that lay untouched.

The room was sombre since the light had faded outside; the royal blue drapes had been drawn across the windows by the maids, and I was left alone. The royal apartments were furnished well, having belonged to the king before me – my father. I'd not had anything removed, and it felt strange to be in a room where I had never been allowed before. Eriel had insisted I take up the royal rooms, as it would look strange if I didn't.

There were small sacrifices to be made if I wanted to keep at least a tolerable reputation. I could not just go about changing everything I wanted to.

Or so Eriel continued to mention whenever he nagged me. Which was often.

There was a dull thud against the door, and I looked up. "Enter," I called forcefully.

Lady Mirana was the first to walk in, the other females following close behind. There were five in total, and my heart sank at the idea of always being followed around by the women. I remember my mother having a

small entourage of married and unmarried women, always at her side, making it hard to ever speak with her alone.

Not that I ever wanted to.

“Your Majesty.” Mirana bowed her head respectfully, all of them still dressed in their dinner attire.

The elite families resided in the castle for the celebrations and would be leaving the court within the next few days to return to their homes dotted about Crimone. It would take days of travel, and it was probably why they needed to keep their spies at court, not wanting to be out of the loop. The ladies who would be a part of my entourage would have to stay in Henvale with me.

I had to admit, I would probably do the same in their position.

“Might I present everyone to you?” Mirana suggested delicately, and I gestured for her to continue. Her smile faded a little when I did not speak to her, but I chose to overlook it, not wanting to get caught up in the girl’s feelings. “This is my sister, Darlia. She is married to the Lord of Blackburn’s son Arthur—”

“I’ll ask if I care, Lady Mirana,” I told her, noting the stroke of hurt that crossed over her features, but the other women did not move a muscle to comfort her. Darlia’s features were sharper than Mirana’s, her eyes a deeper shade of blue and her hair as black as night. *Lovelier.*

“Rebecca Ridley.” Mirana swallowed thickly, trying to cover up how distraught she was at my answer to her. I dragged my eyes over the pretty blonde girl, her hair flowing down to her hips, her frame small for the long limbs she had.

The woman grinned and curtsied when I looked at her. “It is lovely to meet you, Your Majesty. I am sure we will be the best of friends.”

“Possibly,” I muttered, wanting to get the introductions over quickly. She seemed eager, but I knew her father to be someone who played both sides, that of mine, and of the Lords Josephite and Olliea.

“And you?”

I pointed to the smallest, the girl probably no more than five feet tall, her bobbed red hair a stark contrast to the others before her. She was comely, certainly. She gave me a toothy grin once she had closed the floral-patterned fan she was holding; her pale skin bringing out the warmth of her round hazel eyes. “I’m Posy Accora. I so enjoyed your

costume ball, Majesty. I was dressed as a fairy – I managed to make some wings! Did you see me?”

“Ah yes, in passing I did.” *I hadn’t. She must have looked quite ordinary.*

Unless she was the woman Riddel mentioned – she could have been the red-head that dropped her fan.

There was little time for her to reply as the last girl stepped forward, her curves accentuated by the beautiful yellow gown she wore, and she certainly stood out amongst the rest. Compared to her dark complexion, her eyes were a vivid shade of indigo, sparkling as she smiled when I made eye contact with her. “My name is Kalline, Your Majesty.”

I studied her for a moment, wracking my brain to see if I could recall why she looked familiar to me. “I do not recognise you. Which family are you related to?” I asked, already knowing the answer would not be one of the five most powerful lords.

I noticed that Lord Blackburn had not put his daughter forward, and I was surprised. She was just as eligible as any of the others, and the man was usually the only one who was loyal to my family.

Kalline’s eyes were a sign that she was a demon, but more so were the two golden swirls that fell down either side of her face like a tattoo.

She was a mutated demon.

Her skin seemed to glow as she stepped forward and knelt at the side of my chair. Her waist long dark hair had a sheen of sea green to it. “I am the sister to Riddel Cosma.”

I wondered if that was why Riddel had been so reluctant to speak of the mutations with me – her sister had probably been mutated, and if not, her parents had. I could only assume the two of them were half-sisters – or related by marriage only. “Lord Ulara sent me in the hopes that you would take me on as your lady,” Kalline finished.

Everything was beginning to make more sense. *Jesper was going to spy on me too.*

While the thought was annoying, I found it excited me as well. I could have been too hasty, and the man was being true to his word. Kalline may have been put forward purely to give me an ally within the group. After all, I’d done my research on the demon oath Jesper had made and found his words were not false.

His actions might have been out of kindness or out of protection. *I could practically see the man flashing me a smirk, saying that I should try and put some faith in him as he brushed his sinful hands all over me.*

I had to stop thinking about him.

Forcing a smile, I placed a hand on her shoulder carefully. “Of course.” I couldn’t risk upsetting Jesper, not yet. “You are most welcome, Kalline. And what a beautiful dress you’re wearing.”

Kalline’s fingers brushed the bottom of my robe as she pushed herself back up onto her feet. “Oh, I made it myself, Your Majesty. Perhaps you would allow me to make you one too?” Her eyes sparkled with mischief, and I wondered what she could possibly be thinking. *Would she try to stick a pin into me, maybe?*

Surprised that the woman had such skills, I found myself nodding slowly. “That would be... lovely,” I answered, not used to talking to so many people so close to my own age. These women would be around me a lot from this moment, and I had to get used to it quickly.

“Oh, I’d like one too, Lady Kalline. I’d love to say I have a dress made by the same person that designs for the Queen,” Mirana gasped, her hair swishing as she moved closer. “If that is alright.”

“The more the merrier,” Kalline answered willingly.

Although, I did not miss the way Kalline glanced at me, as if to make sure I was hearing the words.

Mirana was undoubtedly grating on me. “On second thought, no, you must be exclusive to the crown, Kalline. You make dresses for me only – and others when I see fit.”

Kalline swept into a curtsy, her fabric of her shimmering and revealing an intricate dark brown pattern. “It would be an honour.”

“Yes, quite right,” I answered, smirking as I looked at the upset Mirana.

Serves her right for trying to copy me.

The women started to talk amongst themselves, and I let them do so, taking the time to see how they reacted to one another. Everyone seemed friendly aside from Darlia, who was keeping to herself – standing behind her sister.

My eyes drifted to the bottom of my robe when I shifted in my seat, surprised to see the black fabric was littered with silver swirls. I could have sworn they were not there before. Shaking the unsettled feeling away, I went back to watching the women.

I quickly decided on my favourite within the group. Posy was full of life and laughter and seemed to be taking control of the group. She radiated comfort.

It would be easy to keep an eye on them if they were always at my side, and I would be sure to work out who was more trustworthy.

I just had to be careful to give them nothing to report back to their families.

Chapter Twelve



The women left after a short time, to report the good news to their families, and I slumped back in my chair. I was not used to having so much energy around me.

Deciding I would try to go to bed early, I stood up to go to my bed chambers but paused when I noticed the doors to my apartments had been left open. “You would think a group of young ladies would have been taught some manners...” I grumbled.

I hesitated when I reached the doors, hearing sounds coming from down the corridor. I had placed Jesper on the same hallway as myself, while everyone else resided in another wing. I heard a string of curse words and something smashing against the floor or a wall.

Too curious for my own good, I pulled my robe further around me and stepped outside of the room. I walked down the cold corridor barefoot, towards the door that was also left slightly ajar.

The sounds continued to get louder, and I could hear Jesper yelling.

“I told you to keep an eye on him,” he growled, another smash sounding, and it led me to wonder what he was damaging in there.

It was Riddel that responded, her smooth voice calm. “I have been, Jesper, but I must be careful.”

Stopping outside the room, I rested my hand against the wall as I tried to see through the gap. All I was met with was Jesper by the window, his

back to the door, and his shoulders visibly shaking as he hunched over. The rage emanated from the tall man, and he flew around. He glared straight at the person on the other side of the room, the one who I could not see.

“And *you*, you were meant to be helping me and yet all you’ve done is hinder my plans. What do you have to say for yourself?” His voice was rough, and I wondered what it would be like to be on the other side of that anger. The man was so different from who he had been before, and it reminded me of the brief moment on the balcony when I’d made him angry, as well as with Baron Angelis.

The other person did not reply, instead, it was Riddel again. “Jesper, I respect you, but you’re being an idiot.” I was still amazed by the closeness of their relationship. “You didn’t even tell us your new plan! We did not expect you to propose to the Queen of Crimone for starters. You told us you wanted the—”

“Do not even finish that sentence,” Jesper hissed, and I could see him growing more frustrated by the second. “The plan has changed since then – since meeting her.”

What else could he have been planning? Could he really have wanted the throne for himself?

“I thought it was obvious when we took her to the island that I intended to propose,” Jesper continued coolly, after beginning to pace.

Riddel scoffed. “You told me you were trying to convince her to support your rule on the island.”

“I didn’t realise I have to pass everything I do by the two of you.” He rolled his eyes and folded his arms across his chest.

I realised that he was dressed in very little. He wore a silvery sheer robe that was left open, revealing his toned physique. Underneath the robe, he wore brown trousers and his boots. His hip jutted out, and I had to do everything to stop from looking at this exposed skin and to forget the way I wanted to run my fingers over his abdominal muscles that he must have worked very hard for...

Are you kidding, Cat? This is important!

His hair was tucked behind his ears, revealing the many piercings he had. I squinted in an attempt to see what their shapes were but had no luck. It was silly anyway – I needed to stop ogling the man every time I saw him.

“I’ll deal with it myself,” Jesper eventually grumbled, his hands forming fists at his sides. The space around his rings went white, and I gulped as I thought of his hands on my skin. “You will go and speak to Lord Olliea in the morning.” The orders were firm and left no room for argument. “Offer him the same thing we offered Lord Josephite.”

Well, that as enough to stop me gawking at him.

I scowled at the idea of him trying to side with my enemy, and I felt my feet moving closer to the door. It was becoming clear to me, however, that Jesper probably was lying to both men.

I stopped myself, my hand on the knob, but I did not dare push it open.

“As you wish, Jesper.” It was the other figure that replied, too low to make out whom it might belong to – I had to strain just to hear the simple words as it was.

“The Queen must not suspect anything that we are doing. Make sure Kalline keeps her busy over the next few days.” Jesper had calmed a little, his fingers absently brushing over his cheek and the mark he had.

I could hear someone walking towards the door, and I swallowed thickly, moving as fast as my legs would carry me down the hallway. I had hoped to be inconspicuous, but I crashed into someone on my way back.

“What are you doing, Your Majesty?” the man spoke loudly, and I felt a growl in my throat as my finger came up to jab the person in the chest.

“Do keep your mouth shut around me, Eden Olliea,” I spat out, making to push past the man, but his hand wrapped around my wrist. “Unhand me before I call my guards.”

“I wouldn’t do that if I were you. Unless you want your future husband to know you were spying on his private conversations.” The nasty male gave me a wicked smirk, and he leaned his head to my eye level.

It was easy to see so much of his repulsive father in him, and it only made me hate him more.

I narrowed my eyes at him. “What are you doing up here? Only myself and my *future husband* are permitted.” I ignored his words, not wanting to give him the satisfaction. I pulled my wrist free and glanced over my shoulder, hoping we were far enough down the long corridor that Jesper and the others had not been disturbed.

“My father asked me to come and seek an audience,” Eden answered, but his inability to make eye contact gave his lie away immediately.

I could have fun with this – if he was going to try to manipulate me, I would do the same. If we were caught in the hallway by the others, at least I had a reason to be in them.

I ran my finger slowly down his chest, raising a suggestive eyebrow at the egotistical male. “I think you came to see me of your own accord. All because you were upset with how I embarrassed you at the ball?”

The flash of annoyance on his face only confirmed I was right, and I revelled in having the upper hand. “You did not embarrass me, Your Majesty.”

“I was trying to,” I said, “and it is good to know it worked. Now, off you go, little boy.” I used the same words as I had the night before. Resting my palm on his lower stomach and giving him a solid push backwards.

Eden’s lips tugged into a snarl, and I ducked out of his way when he tried to grab me.

“Now that’s not very nice,” I commented, but grunted when he backhanded my cheek. It began to sting, but a bubble of laughter left my mouth. “Hitting royalty? Well, your father would be proud.”

“Just be quiet, you rambling bitch,” he growled. His hand moved to wrap around my throat, and I let him. The feeling of his fingers digging into my windpipe made me gasp for air, but I grinned at him. He was using it as a warning that he could cut off my breathing if he wanted to.

“Go on then, tell me what you want. I’m all ears.”

The man was growing impatient, the fury dancing in his eyes. “Marry me, Catania.”

“I’m already engaged. Sorry, sweetheart.” I shrugged but finally winced when he shook me by the neck. His face was wild, contorted with rage. When my eyes focused on him again, I brought a hand up to his wrist. I dug my nails into his flesh until he winced.

“You don’t want to marry that *demon*. Everyone knows that. My father is trying to help you avoid ruin.”

“You’ve made your daddy upset by not winning my hand, haven’t you?” I cooed, unable to stop myself from being snarky.

He swore and shoved my back into the nearest stone wall, a jolt of pain rushing through my body. It was exhilarating. “I would rather marry a toad than you.”

“That’s charming.”

“I said quiet!” He shook my neck again. My body rattled, my toes barely touching the stone anymore, and I went quiet to bide my time.

“As I was saying, I would rather marry anyone else, but my father needs this. He needs the power that would come from our union, and I would do anything to bring our family name out of the mud where you left it.”

I tried to conceal my smile.

“By marrying me, you would get a loyal family in your Small Council.” It was his turn to smile – although it was sinister. “Since you cannot trust anyone now, not with the rumours. Everyone knows you killed your parents.”

“That’s a very bold statement,” I answered, keeping my tone as level as possible with my windpipe being crushed. It was not enough to cut off my air supply completely but enough to warn me. His accusation bothered me little. I was so used to being suspected of deeds I had not committed.

“I have a solution for you.” I gave him no chance to respond. “How about you marry one of my ladies? They are far more appealing to you than I would be. And it would solidify a link between two noble families.”

“But they are not the queen.” I could see the confusion on his face as he tried to make sense of what I was offering him.

Mentally rolling my eyes at the man’s idiocy, I continued, “No, but since you would rather marry a toad than me, I thought it might make you happier.” I had offered another poor woman to the man, but as long as it was not me that would be chained to him, I would sacrifice anyone.

I could smell the wine on his breath and realised just how inebriated he was. That was probably why his reaction had been so violent. He sniffed, “Who would you suggest?”

My plan was working. “Mirana Josephite,” I said, without really thinking. It was the first name that came to my mind.

Eden narrowed his eyes, but then they widened in fear, and he suddenly let out a yelp – dropping his grip. My feet firmly landed on the ground, and I stared, as he stumbled back shaking his arm. I followed his limb until I spotted the large wolf hanging off it. Arka’s jaws were wrapped around the man’s forearm, and the growl that left him was menacing.

“Get off, beast!” Eden cried.

At first, I just watched as the wolf clung to the man. Eden’s face twisted in pain, and he tried to yank himself away.

Eventually, I decided to help. *Even though I was enjoying the show.*

“Arka,” I called, my hand moving to my sore throat. “Arka, come here!” I called louder the second time, the silver wolf dropping the man and stalking to my side. His tail wagged as he moved to sit at my side like an obedient puppy, and I was shocked that he had responded to my call.

“What the hell...” Eden clutched his mauled arm, his terror evident.

Arka growled at the man, and he bared his sharp teeth at him, the snap of his jaw not as alarming to me as it was to Eden. The blond man jumped back and raised his sword, his arm bleeding.

“I would put that down if I were you, sir.”

I turned to the voice. Riddel was sauntering towards us, her hands clutching two blades. She twisted them around in her fingers expertly before throwing one towards the trembling male, his eyes following it as it skimmed past his face. *I’d have to get her to teach me that.*

Riddel clicked her tongue. “Threatening royalty is treason, you know?”

“It seems a lot of people have forgotten that,” I grumbled to myself, my hand tentatively reaching out to brush the wolf between his ears. He had been a good boy, after all.

The woman stepped closer to us, her lilac eyes flickering to my own, and I swallowed the lump that had formed in my burning throat – shaking my head as my only indication of what to do. She stepped forward and brushed her hand over the man’s shoulder, his body tensing as she gripped him with her long-nailed fingers.

“Get out of Her Majesty’s sight before she changes her mind and asks me to gut you like a fish. Or perhaps a *toad*.”

So, she had heard the words that had been exchanged. I wondered if Jesper was waiting at his door, also listening in.

Eden appeared torn for a moment, but pulled himself free and scuttled away, clutching his injured arm.

Arka stayed still; the wolf was well-behaved for an animal that was usually wild. Riddel turned back to me, and her eyes ran over my neck, and I raised my hand to touch it at her scrutiny. “Do you need to see a physician, Your Majesty?” Her concern was genuine, but I shook my head quickly.

“N-no, I am quite well, thank you,” I answered, shakily. “I apologise.”

“There is nothing to apologise for, Majesty.” Riddel shook her head, her dark hair flowing beautifully around her as she did, her hand coming up to rest against my cheek as she tilted my head to one side. A gasp left my

lips, her skin hot against my own, and I stayed statuesque as she analysed the damage there.

The woman smelt of cinnamon. Her scent surrounded me as she got into my personal space, and it was something she and Jesperin shared. *Something I wasn't accustomed to – people invading my boundaries.*

“You may call me Cat,” I told her after a moment of silence, knowing she could probably feel my blood pumping throughout my body as her fingers brushed my neck. “Since you are so close to Jesper.”

The woman's lips twitched as she smirked, letting her hand fall from my face to brush along my arm. “Cat,” she spoke, “like the animal.”

I found myself rolling my eyes.

“Do you have claws I should watch out for?” Riddel was playful as she took my hand in her soft one, checking the tips of my fingers. “Or perhaps you have a tail. I should have a look.”

“Hilarious. You do realise you are speaking to the Queen of Crimone?” I got out, finding the woman had made me smile without my realising. She was enchanting and intimidating all at once but managed to ease the nerves that I'd buried within me.

Riddel winked. “I know.” She chuckled low.

“Is that how you flirt with everyone?”

“Bold of you to assume I am flirting with you, Cat,” she hummed. “I have someone I like far too much to risk flirting with you.”

“Posy Accora?” I asked bluntly.

Riddel did not reply, but the small smile that graced her face was enough to convince me I was right. “I will take Arka and return to Jesper now that I am sure you're alright.”

The woman called Arka to her side, but the large animal did not move, staying glued to the floor beside me. His face turned up to mine, and I was stunned as he began to walk the rest of the way to my door on his own accord.

“It seems he takes after his master,” Riddel grumbled. “Is he alright to come with you?”

“Will Jesper mind?” I found myself asking, not wanting to anger the man by taking his animal. He may be annoying, but I would not stoop so low... *well, maybe I would, but I had angered one man that evening, and I did not need to do so to another.*

Riddel shrugged, already turning on her heel, waving a hand. “I’ll handle it. Just like I always do. Sleep tight, Cat, don’t let the big wolf bite.”

As she turned to leave, I found myself asking, “Does Jesper really know my secrets?”

Riddel paused, turning to look at me, her hair swinging behind her and revealing hints of purple within it. She met my gaze, before hesitantly replying, “No. I’m not sure he does.”

That’s how it will stay.

I watched her disappear, the door clicking shut behind her, and I shuffled towards my room – following Arka inside. I watched as the wolf sniffed about the room before he settled at the end of my bed.

“Just go to sleep,” I muttered to myself, tired from the ordeal, and I knew I would have much to attend to the next day. I took off my robe and climbed into the comfy bed, adjusting the pillows until I decided one would be enough and tucked the other one into my arms to hold it. After making sure I was comfortable, I leaned to blow out the candles.

Thrown into darkness, I stared at the strange shadows of the room. As a child, I’d been terrified of the dark and would often cry myself to sleep, but now I found solace in it. I could hear the deep breaths of the wolf at the end of my bed, and I smiled at the very idea – the wolf as my guardian from the shadows.

“Are you going to kill me, Arka? Or is your master planning that himself?” I asked, knowing there would be no reply. “Is that why you followed me back here?”

Look at you, talking to an animal, Cat. You’re going mad.

I was met with a loud snore from the animal, and I chuckled, rolling onto my side in the hopes of getting comfortable under the layers of soft bedding. Feeling warm at night was not familiar to me. I stretched my legs out, the space also unknown to me.

My usual room was quite far from the one I was in now. I’d been placed with the staff when I was young, away from the rest of the family. Some of the staff would bring me extra blankets in the cold months or say prayers with me to the goddesses before bed. And sometimes, I would convince them to tell me stories if it was a particularly tough day. However, even that felt less lonely than this did.

It was these thoughts that helped me drift off to sleep, trying to ignore the feeling of dread that had been consuming me and plaguing my thoughts.

Something bad was going to happen, and it was going to happen soon.

Chapter Thirteen



“What?” I asked, hands resting flat on the desk as I stared at the crying Mirana, her sobs shrill and painful to listen to.

“Eden Olliea was found dead last night,” Darlia’s flat voice filled in the gaps for me, although she was staring at her embroidery – uninterested in paying me any more attention. “He had been attacked outside of an inn, and he was found by the innkeeper.”

I tapped my fingers on my knee as I thought about when I’d seen him last night. I wondered what he was doing at the inn when it was so late, but then again, men did not have to worry about travelling around late at night. A luxury that women did not have in Crimone – or anywhere.

Mirana continued to sob into her hands, and I raised an eyebrow. “Were you... close with Eden?” I asked. *Did I really care, though?*

“In truth...” she hiccupped, her whole body jolting with it. “I am relieved. He was a cruel man, Your Majesty.”

And I had promised her hand to the man. Without a second thought. I should have felt guilty – but I would have done so again in a heartbeat if it meant getting him away from me.

But what had been so cruel about him? I might have witnessed first-hand his aggressive side, but I did not realise he was so open with it. There had always been rumours of his conduct, but perhaps his father had managed to cover up more than I thought.

“Do they have any idea who would have attacked him?” I asked, eyes flickering to Eriel, who entered the room and strode over to my chair. He dropped something into my lap. The letter was crumpled, and the seal looked tampered with.

“Where have you been, Eriel?” I muttered.

He bowed his head solemnly. “I was otherwise engaged, Majesty.”

The women were startled by Eriel’s behaviour, and I narrowed my eyes at his polite answer, glancing at his attire. He looked worn out, as though he had been rushing about. “Are you *still* angry with me about last night?”

It was strange – I thought we had come to an amicable conclusion.

I’d told him that morning about what I heard outside of Jesper’s room, and Eriel had become even more adamant that I should call off the engagement. Eriel could see the benefits of a marriage between us, but he had made his dislike of the man well-known to me.

I had not told him it was all pretend yet. I couldn’t imagine what his response would have been if I told him what happened with Eden – but I had kept that part to myself so it would not worry him unnecessarily.

“Not at all, Majesty. I am merely doing my duty.”

Arka growled at Eriel, the wolf having stayed by my side all morning, choosing not to go back to his master. I shushed the wolf, surprised since he had not acted this way with anyone before – aside from Eden.

“Lord Ulara wrote that he has something for you. I read through it on my way here,” Eriel told me. “I wanted to check it wasn’t anything harmful, so I opened your letter – you must forgive me.”

I frowned at his behaviour. It wasn’t like Eriel to do something like that. “You don’t usually read my correspondence without permission – and I thought you called him The Fox?” I asked, but as I read through the letter I jumped out of my seat, my eyes widening. “If you’ll excuse me, ladies,” I spoke quickly, stumbling over the words as I began to move from the room. Arka bounded over to my side as I stormed out.

Eriel was making excuses for me to the women, and I ignored everyone who greeted me on my way down to the stables.

“Jesperin Ulara!” I yelled, spotting the male from a mile away. I was furious, the blood rushing to my ears. I waved the letter in my hand as the man turned to face me, his hand resting on a beautiful white stallion.

Jesper smirked, waving his hand to wiggle his fingers at me. “That’s not exactly how I thought you would be crying my name for the first time, but

I'll take it."

I shoved the letter to his chest, my breathing heavy as I jabbed my other finger into his face. I faltered when I realised how close we were. But what was interesting was the change to his mark. The number had changed to three. The ink looked angry around his eye as if he had been scratching it. Snapping out of my trance, I hissed, "what do you call *this*?"

Jesper raised an eyebrow, tutting. "Do you not know what a letter is?"

"Don't you get smart with me, Jesper."

He laughed, a hearty laugh, that made my insides flutter. "Oh, you mean what it says? Well, that's your engagement present. Aren't you happy?"

"No, because you're being a fool," I snapped.

"I thought we spoke about not fighting with me all the time." Jesper smiled, catching my wrist, and pulling my hand down so he could press a soft kiss to the back of it. Again, my traitorous body enjoyed the feeling. "You would do well to pretend to enjoy my company, Kitty Cat. People are watching us."

He was right. Of course. Which made the situation even worse.

I glanced over my shoulder to see Lord Josephite speaking with his daughters. He was by his family carriage, intending to travel to their home in Jertha – which was in the north of Crimone. His brow furrowed as he stared in our direction, and I let my head snap back to Jesper, who was watching me in amusement until his eyes flickered to my neck.

"What is this then?" He muttered darkly.

Riddel must have revealed what had happened the night before to him, and he caught my chin as he adjusted my collar so he could take a better look. Luckily, the high neck of my cornflower blue riding coat covered it from onlookers.

"I'll not ask who did this to you, for I already know," He muttered coolly, his warm finger brushing over one of the darker marks and I hissed in pain. "If someone ever tries to lay a hand on you again, just call my name. I'll make them regret even looking in your direction, my sweet."

My sweet? He'd started calling me that when we were at our most serious...

Jesper kept me in place until he was satisfied he'd seen it all and let me go, adjusting the white ruffles of my shirt beneath. The bruises were not as bad as I thought they would be – especially after the salve I'd applied started to soothe them.

He wetted his lips with his tongue, and he grinned, knowing my eyes had flickered to his red lips. "So, what do you say you try to be kind to me? At least around our adoring fans," he teased.

I cleared my throat. "I know I should, but you make it incredibly hard to like you."

"I'm taking that as a compliment." Jesper chuckled, but I was still curious about his angry-looking ink. *Did he really think I would not notice?* "Now, are you going to join me for our ride?"

"Not until you explain to me why you did this?" I waved the paper again.

He sighed heavily, and moved to place his hands on my waist, leaning his head close to my ear. His hot breath tickled, but I tried not to shiver.

This was all part of the show, I told myself. He liked toying with me, and I'd given him plenty of opportunity to with this engagement. If people thought that I did not need the man, they would continue to try to poke holes in my reign.

I was already a female ruler. And they expected heirs.

Sighing, he rubbed his hands over my arms, and my breath caught in my throat. "I thought you would like the gift," he muttered against the shell of my ear.

"Why would I want you to give me Demorai Island? You've already caused me enough problems by taking it over."

Rolling his eyes back so that I could only see the whites for a moment, he huffed. "I thought that was obvious. What belongs to me also belongs to you. Besides, this gives Crimone access to the trading links, and you don't have to worry about finding another way to impress the lords of your little council."

"Small Council," I corrected and raised my hand to pinch my nose, the information clogging my brain. I already had enough to think about, without adding his strange behaviour to it. "You're the lord of the island. Surely you want to keep that for yourself? You will have nothing when our arrangement ends."

"I can't reveal my motives to you, Queenie. But I have my reasons. I am repaying a debt to someone by doing this." Jesperin smiled, proud of himself.

"You know, the island did belong to me already," I commented, shaking my head in confusion. "It was just run by the council—"

“Which I got rid of for you. Now you can rule in your own right without having to pass anything by a council.”

While I was grateful, it didn't sit right with me. The man had probably spent years getting support to take over the island, so why was he just giving it to a woman he'd met only some days before?

People surely couldn't be that good. Who was this debt owed to? Was it my parents? He said he had met them before.

“Why are you being so kind to me? I haven't given you anything.” I frowned deeply in my uncertainty, overwhelmed by the amount the man had promised me over the last few days.

Jesper tilted his head, a shadow passing over his face from his red locks, and I wanted to reach out and brush the silver strands behind his ear to see him better. My fingers twitched at the thought.

Jesper spoke, his voice sultry, trailing his fingers down to grip my wrists. “To make you fall in love with me, so I am indispensable to you, Kitty Cat.” His skin was hot against my own, and my lips parted.

I scoffed and took another step back from him. Of course, it was too good to be true. For a moment I'd thought that perhaps the man might be better than I had first imagined, but I was wrong. The glint in his eyes was obvious as he watched me.

I had to force myself to disregard his words, despite the pang of hurt in my chest. This is why I tried to keep my distance. No strings.

“We should give them something to watch, no? We have much to attend to today,” I said briskly, patting his bicep, as I brushed past him towards my own horse.

The stable hands were working to saddle Joy, my grey mare. She may not have been considered a beautiful horse to others, but she had served me well for many years, the first and only one I was ever given.

Having very few chances to ride her publicly, I would sneak out with Eriel and Willen to ride her in the evenings when no one was around.

A gasp left my lips as a strong arm wrapped around my middle before I could reach Joy. My body was lifted with ease, and I moved my legs to accommodate the white stallion and saddle that were now between them. It made me glad that I settled for a pair of riding trousers rather than a riding gown. I watched the large man swing himself up behind me, being sure not to sit on my blue over-coat. Jesper moved it over my legs, the silver leaf

detailing glittering in the sun. *Kalline certainly had a signature design she liked to use.*

“You could have asked, Jesper.” I landed an elbow in his stomach, hearing a small grunt that made me smirk.

“So you could refuse me?” he whispered against my ear, reaching his arms around me for the reins. I smacked his hands away and gripped the reins myself.

I liked riding. I wasn’t about to let Jesper take over just because he’d hauled me onto the horse with him to make it look as though we could stand to be around one another.

“What is his name?” I asked, running a hand over the horse’s neck, noticing he still seemed calm despite the extra rider. “He’s quite fine.”

“You haven’t said anything that nice about me.” Jesper sniffed, and I bit my lip to hide the smile that was threatening to form on my lips. “His name is Mirris,” Jesper told me, hands holding onto my hips as he pressed his chest closer to my back. I swallowed thickly at the proximity, shifting a little in the saddle.

I heard him grunt again, and I raised an eyebrow. “Did I elbow you again?”

“No, but that might be less painful,” he grumbled tightly, squeezing his hands, which made me let out a gasp. “Unless you want me to poke you with something, I think we should get moving.”

Knowing I was completely flushed, I agreed.

I only had to get through the next few hours.



The people gathered in the streets as we made our way through the town of Naever, towards the port. It was always a strange experience for me, seeing the world outside of the dark castle walls.

The warmth of the demon behind me had become a comfort in the cool breeze that seemed to blow as we got closer to the sea. I kept a hold of the reins, being sure to brush Jesperin's hands back into place when he would try to let them roam about. It was as though he knew what the slightest touch would do to me, and he relished in it.

The dirt path changed to cobblestones when we reached Naever. There were some market stalls as we rode through, as well as doors open, revealing shops inside. The smell of fish dominated the air, yet I did not find it completely unpleasant, just different. I could practically taste the salt on my tongue.

People were clambering and pushing past one another in the hope of getting a glance at the queen and her future consort, and I found myself straightening.

I would live up to their expectations.

They were probably aware of the stories – a princess too ill to see the outside world. Never made appearances. No one ever caught sight of her. Then, suddenly, she was their queen.

All they knew was a name. *Catania*.

I felt awkward with their stares and the curiosity that lay behind them. They wanted to know what made me so special. So different from them. *I was a queen – their rightful ruler.*

Jesper brushed a hand over my corseted stomach, my thighs tightening on the saddle, making me snap out of the spiral I had let myself fall into.

"You do not seem familiar with Naever, Kitty Cat," Jesperin hummed against my head as he leaned his own down.

Frowning, I replied, "What makes you say that?"

"You've stopped in the middle of the road." He sounded amused. Warm fingers slowly brushed over the tops of my hands, and he wrapped his own around them. "How about I finish guiding us through, hm?"

"I know where I'm going," I huffed, shaking off his grip. "I just got... confused for a moment."

"Of course." He knew I was lying.

Disregarding his hand that was pointing left, I turned us right. I could hear him let out a frustrated groan behind me, his chest vibrating.

People followed us as we turned down the street, but there were fewer crowds down the lane I had chosen. Those that were standing down there were muttering amongst themselves, and I heard comments about Eden Olliea and his untimely death.

“I heard the queen got tired of his father’s constant pushing for them to wed. Especially after her engagement announcement...”

They fell into silence when they noticed us, bowing their heads politely instead.

So, they thought I would have a man murdered for wanting to marry me. That was interesting. I knew they did not know me, but I hadn’t thought they disliked my character so much.

I had not been very present in their lives, however. This was my first proper tour of anywhere outside of Henvale – aside from my kidnapping to the island. *But that had not been a choice.*

Another person protested on the other side of the road. “I heard it was The Fox. He got jealous of the man’s intentions towards the queen and killed the Olliea boy when he was too drunk to fight back.” *They were not shy about their opinion.*

I gripped the reins tighter, rage bubbling inside of me. I could not even be sure why, but I felt they did Jesper a disservice. It was one thing to speak about me, but Jesper did not seem to care about the slander.

The man spoke again as we made to pass them. He made no effort to keep his voice down. “Or they both killed him. That could be why the queen agreed to marry him so quickly – they both have a taste for such things if the rumours can be believed.”

“Where did you hear such rumours, good man?” Jesperin spoke loudly, with purpose, and my eyes went wide in alarm as I looked up at him. Jesper continued, “I should like to thank them for taking the time to talk about us. It’s incredibly flattering.” He then winked in the man’s direction.

The man looked horrified at the words, sheepishly bowing his head.

“Jesper,” I warned.

“I didn’t do anything. These people do not like me because I am different to them, Queenie.” Jesper shook his head, closing his eyes for a moment as he did so. “I may as well play into their opinions. It’s fun.”

“As much as I hated what that man said, you are not making it very easy to show we played no part in Eden Olliea’s murder,” I countered.

Jesperin shrugged nonchalantly and turned his head away. *How Suspicious.*

I began to wonder if perhaps he *had* played a part in the man's death. He hadn't seemed surprised, and I knew that Riddel must have reported back to him what she saw the previous night. *But why would he kill him?*

We rode to the end of the street, to the town square. I stopped when I saw Lord Olliea and his wife, the two of them in black and purple – the mourning colours in Crimone. They were waiting in the centre of the square for my arrival, right by a stone fountain of the goddess Laxia.

Naever was their home, but I'd wrongly assumed they would not greet us after the news of their son. It was probably why the people were talking about what had happened – they would have known of the young man and might have respected him.

Although I found that hard to imagine.

We took our time approaching them and I was not able to force myself to feel sorry. *Eden Olliea deserved what he got.*

Jesperin offered to help me to dismount after him, the feeling of his hands on my body not as odd anymore, but rather comforting in the moment. His touch was a reassurance – he had proved himself to be on my side so far.

“So, are we giving condolences? Offering our congratulations on losing their most horrific child?” Jesperin was jovial, forcing me to link my arm through his, my hand settling on the crease of his elbow.

I rolled my eyes and stifled my laugh behind a fake cough. “You know the answer to that, Jesper.”

The man groaned. “Boring.”

I had grown used to his playful answers, and we approached the couple, who bowed their heads respectfully. Lord Olliea hesitated, but the hand his wife placed on his back convinced him not to cause a scene.

At least not yet.

“My sincerest condolences to the two of you.” I could not push myself to make up something nice about the man because I could not think of anything.

“It is most kind of you, Your Majesty,” Lady Olliea replied, looking to her husband, and moving to nudge him with the side of her arm. He shuffled on his feet, glancing to the guards I had close by who were still on their horses.

Eventually, Lord Olliea spoke curtly, "Thank you, Majesty." But then he could not stop himself. His gaze was hard as he kept his round chin high. "But there is no need to pretend. I know you had something to do with his death, and I will make sure to uncover what role you played."

I tutted at his open accusation and stopped Jesper from stepping forward, his eyes glinting with rage. It was easy to tell he wanted to storm past the arm I'd extended to prevent him from moving.

"That is a very bold accusation, Lord Olliea. I will forgive you because you are grieving," I said coolly.

"I only speak the truth." The man grunted. "And when I expose you for your crime, I hope you rot in a prison cell for the rest of your days, knowing that you have let down the entire kingdom. This is why a woman could never rule Crimone."

I had to use every ounce of self-control to stop *myself* from lunging for the man.

"Watch your tongue before I cut it out of your mouth, you swine," Jesperin snarled, hand going to the hilt of his sword. I could feel him tense beneath my hand. "You are speaking of your Queen. I do not take kindly to those who disrespect our monarch."

It was strange to have someone other than Eriel fight to defend my honour so fervently. I felt my stomach flutter. But I had no time to dwell on the feelings that Jesper ignited within me.

"Now I know where your son got his awful personality from." I sighed, my hand moving to rest over Jesper's on the sword. Smiling sweetly, I tilted my head closer to Lord Olliea. His wife looked apprehensive, but her husband remained unmoving. "Your son deserved what he got." My voice was low, and only for their ears. "And you will reach the same fate if you continue to oppose me."

Even though I had nothing to do with Eden's death, they were already blaming me. I didn't mind playing into it. Jesper would be proud of me, at least.

"Why, you little bitch!" Lord Olliea went to swing for me, but his wife continued to latch onto the man to stop him.

Men were the impulsive ones, it seemed.

"It appears that everyone wants to strike their queen these days. Hm, there must be another way for all of you to get your anger out," I mused, playfully. "I have an idea." I clapped my hands together as I moved back

from the Ollieas. “How about a joust? I should like to celebrate the Olliea family properly.”

Death was not usually celebrated with such events. You would hold a small funeral in the local church, or the cathedral in Henvale if you were of noble blood. But there would be no celebrations attached to it.

I was offending them on purpose, of course.

“What a wonderful idea, light of my life.” Jesper had spoken before Lord Olliea could move his dry lips around any words. Jesper’s cold gaze flickered to those around us who had started to talk amongst themselves.

The people were surprised by the suggestion, but it did not seem as though they were against it. A joust meant a day off for all of them, a trip to Henvale to celebrate in most cases.

Especially if the ruler was taking part.

My cheeks burned at the name Jesperin had used, and I removed my hand from his, clasping my hands behind my back. “Yes, everyone should take part, even you, Lord Olliea. It will give you a chance to knock me off my horse as you so wish.”

I could hear the intake of breath from his wife, probably from the disbelief that I would take part myself. *Women were not usually competitors – a rule that I would change. So many out-of-date rules that needed to be abolished.*

“He’ll have to beat me first.” My fiancé smiled crookedly, leaning down to press his lips close to my ear, but he did not whisper. Instead, he spoke at his normal pitch, his hand coming up to cover his mouth. “I’ll knock him right off that high horse of his for you, Kitty Cat. What will you give me as my prize?” The words tickled my ear and I felt myself wanting to laugh.

Biting the inside of my cheek at the words, I smirked. “A kiss, perhaps?” I had to pretend to be fond of the man – *I’d started to find it was not hard to be anyway.*

“Is that the prize for everyone?” A man’s booming voice piped up from the side. He was a merchant of some kind I would have guessed, his clothes ill-fitting but expensive, swathed in green silk that could rival anything the royal family had. He was an average-sized man with a short brown beard and thinning hair that was the colour of autumn leaves. I could not guess his age but assumed he was a similar age to my father, so around his early fifties. His pale lips formed a handsome smile, his

piercing green eyes unwavering. “Or would there be some other reward, Your Majesty?”

There was something familiar about the man, but I could not place why.

“You can’t seriously be intending to make a profit from my son’s death, Sir Gates!” Lady Olliea wailed.

I’d been mistaken about his social standing.

I did not know everything about the peerage of the kingdom, I was still trying to learn who everyone was. The throne had been thrust into my hands suddenly, and I’d not had enough time to learn all I needed to.

Sir Gates let out a humourless chuckle. “Lady Olliea, the joust is meant to be a celebration for your son and what a wonderful idea it is. The Queen is doing you a service, honouring your horrible boy.”

Whoever this man was, he appeared to be a supporter. I was grateful for it, even if I only believed his loyalty was for the coin he thought he might get.

His word was trusted by the people, however, as I could hear the murmurs of agreement. The rumours about Jesper were being forgotten already.

“Sir Gates, you can be assured that there will be a financial reward for those who take part, just as it has been in previous years,” I answered, ignoring the muttered complaints from the Olliea family.

With a grin, Gates stepped forward, the gold in his pockets clinking against one another. “Then I will come and take part. For the money and the kiss.” He winked.

Initially, he came across as charming as he flashed his pearly white teeth. A man old enough to be my *father*.

I tried my best to try and recall where I had seen him – since there was something incredibly off-putting about the man.

But I would never entertain his flirtatious advances. I have standards.

Jesperin’s hand tightened around mine as he stepped to be at my side. “I look forward to seeing you on the field, Siwel.” *So, they knew each other.*

This was an interesting development.

I did not remove my hand from Jesper’s, feeling his thumb brush across the back of my hand, and I let my shoulders relax when I realised how tense I’d become. Siwel raised a bushy eyebrow, and his eyes flickered to our hands before going back to Jesper. “Ah yes, I forgot to send my

congratulations, *Fox*. Quite the elevation in status for you.” He used the nickname to make fun of him, I noted.

“There was no need. I do not want anything from you,” Jesper bit out, his jaw clenched and eyes fiery. I stared at him, studying his expression, as it was not the same anger he had shown me.

It was hate plastered over his face.

Siwel raised a brow but let out a bark of laughter, his smile becoming less handsome by the minute. There was something cruel to him when I watched closely and took Jesper’s mood into account. “I thought we were friends, *Fox*. You still owe me for the support I showed you on the island. Your mother—”

“Do not mention that woman,” Jesper spat, nostrils flaring, his hand squeezing mine tighter, and I wondered if he realised what he was doing.

To stop the confrontation from continuing, I raised my free hand to rest on Jesper’s bicep. “We should be going. We have much to organise back at Henvale, darling.” The words left my lips with ease, almost as though it were a usual encounter between us. “Say goodbye to your friend and let us make haste.”

Jesper’s face turned down to mine, and his lips twitched. “As you wish, *light of my life*,” he drawled, his genuine smile indicating he was pleased with my response to him.

Keeping on his good side had its perks, as he was more inclined to do as I said.

“I hope you will all be in attendance for the joust, especially you, Lord and Lady Olliea. Your son did always enjoy a joust, I am told.” I landed one final jab before waiting for them to pay their respects to me.

I kept my eyes glued to the Olliea family as they bowed their heads begrudgingly, and I glanced at the man that had Jesper so on edge.

The people around the square had been sated because of Sir Siwel and his support, returning to their everyday lives.

And all I wanted to do was get as far away as I could from Naever and question Jesper until he told me why Sir Siwel Gates had riled him so much.

Chapter Fourteen



“Are you going to tell me what all of that was about?” I asked as we sat atop Mirris, heading back to the outskirts of Naever. The guards that accompanied us stayed behind our horse and talked amongst themselves.

Jesper let his chin rest on the top of my head, his strong arms wrapped around my middle, much like a child who was having a strop. He’d been in a mood ever since we left the square and had not muttered a word since.

It surprised me since he was always talking. I was learning that Jesper liked to touch people, especially me. It was his way of communicating. I was the opposite, which was why I felt uneasy initially.

The man was beginning to have more of a place in my life than I would have liked, as I found myself melting into his hold.

“No.”

“Don’t be a child, tell me.” I rolled my eyes and felt his pointed chin dig into my head a little as we went over a particularly rough patch of the road. “Sir Siwel Gates is clearly someone you’ve known for a long time. And he mentioned your mother.”

I bit back a groan of discomfort and tried not to move away when he started to speak, being able to feel the movement through my skull. “Fine, I’ll tell you. Siwel helped me when I first left my father’s boat after his death. He claimed to be a friend of my mother’s, and I was too young to see past his empty promises and deceit.”

“Did he really know your mother?” I found myself asking.

“He was her new husband,” he spat out, bitterly. It silenced me and left me waiting for him to continue. “She married him to settle the debts she made over the years, even though my father would always send her money.” I felt his hold tighten around me. “Her family were mutators, the very people that tested on my father. It’s how they met, actually. She helped him to escape, and that is how I came to be.”

Scrunching my nose up in confusion, I moved suddenly to look up at him. “Why did she not come with you?”

“Her family,” he answered, willingly telling me his family history. “The Riadane family knew what she had done, and she had to return to stop them from coming to search for my father and then me.”

“Do you resent her for her choice?”

He sighed. “I resent her for not trying to contact me. Instead, she sends her new husband at every opportunity. I have not seen her since she handed me off to my father and rushed back to the money and life she had known before.” Sensing I wanted to know more, the man let out a quiet chuckle, his breath fanning my cheek as he moved his head down. I could hear his breathing, my fingers gripping the reins tighter. “Just ask me. It’s not like you to hold back, Kitty Cat.”

Swallowing heavily, I let out a breath along with the words that had been threatening to fall from my lips before. “Does she make excuses?”

“What, for not seeing me?” I nodded, and he continued, “Yes, each is less believable than the last. As I got older, I stopped caring and tried not to contact her at all.”

I paused to stop Mirris since we had been following the river towards Henvale and the horses deserved a rest.

“We will continue once I have stretched my legs,” I announced, already beginning to dismount. When my boots hit the ground, I let out a happy sigh, feeling better on my feet than on top of the horse with my aching thighs.

The guards busied themselves watering the horses, and Jesper climbed down elegantly, landing beside me.

“Your Majesty. Lord Ulara.” It was Willen that approached us, shifting on his feet and rubbing the back of his neck. His armour shone brightly in the sunshine. “We have a problem.”

“A problem?” I repeated the words, giving him permission to continue.

He looked towards the road and then his wary brown eyes met my own. “The way we came has been blocked off by a fallen tree.”

The scoff from Jesper mirrored how I felt. “A fallen tree? Did someone cut it down to prevent Her Majesty from passing through?” Jesper was incredulous, his hand brushing over Mirris slowly to calm the restless horse.

“We suspect that orders were given to the woodcutters, Lord Ulara.” Willen was tired, his voice heavy. “I have located another route for you through Sende, but it will take the rest of the afternoon.”

Sende was a village located on the river, mainly unheard of by those who lived in the bigger towns. I merely nodded to the man. “Alright, Willen.” I sent him off with a wave of my hand, aggravated at the idea that Lord Olliea has disrupted my journey. I had expected retaliation, just not so soon after the event.

“Ulara.” I caught his arm after he handed Mirris over to one of his own men. Jesper had arrived with a small entourage, Riddel and Kalline being the only two I knew the names of, but it consisted of no more than ten people. A mix of demons and humans – and some had accompanied us.

“Can’t you call me darling like you did earlier, Kitty Cat? It sounds incredible coming from your lips.”

This was going to be a long afternoon.



“What’s that building there?” Jesper pointed to an old white stone building as we passed through Sende. There were a few small cottages, but

otherwise, the place had little more than a small church and a school. Aside from the strange building on the outskirts.

I followed his finger and shrugged. "I do not know."

"What? Surely, you should know. Have you never been here before?" Jesper chuckled, his hands moving to rest over mine on the reins, and he turned Mirris and changed our path. I could hear Willen behind us, giving orders to the rest of the men to follow close behind.

"I was never allowed out of my parents' sight, and they did not often tour the kingdom," I muttered, disappointed when his hands left my body as he got down and moved to look at the sign that was outside of the practically dilapidated building.

Jesper called over his shoulder, "It's an orphanage. I can't hear any children, though." His lips formed a frown, and he began to walk along the pebbled path that led to the big red double doors.

Surprised by his confident stride, I threw myself off Mirris as quickly as I could and rushed to fall into step beside him. The long riding coat I wore swished behind me, my feet thudding against the ground. I'd not run in so long, yet it would be a funny sight for the guards to watch their queen chasing after someone.

Jesper used the knocker on the door and rested against the doorframe as he waited for an answer. I was panting when I finally reached him, and as I went to ask him what he was playing at, the creaking door was thrown open.

"I told ya' before, Mister John. We don't want no more kids, we have enough 'ere. Oh. You're not who I thought you were." The woman who answered the door was small in stature and rounded with child, the dark circles under her eyes making her seem older than she probably was. I guessed she was in her early thirties, her blonde hair messily pinned to her head.

Jesper straightened and offered a charming smile, his teeth shining. "Hello, we were passing by the establishment this fine afternoon. I wanted to stop and make a donation."

He didn't give our names, which was smart. Luckily, the royal guards were further back, and the woman's round glasses led me to believe she would not spot them. Jesper moved to try to look past the door. "Are the children around? I would have thought having children here would make it incredibly noisy."

I felt unsettled by how silent it was inside, and I frowned deeper, the woman's eyes darting behind her and then back to us. She looked us up and down, eyes lingering on Jesper for a while. It was probably due to his demon features, but I was glad he didn't hide them. He had nothing to be ashamed of.

His annoying personality was something else, though.

"Oh, uh, they are just busy, sir. You should really be goin' though. We don't need no donations."

I raised my eyebrow in confusion. "But this is an orphanage. Surely any donation is useful?" I asked, stepping closer. "We have come all this way. It would be a shame to not be able to do our part." My question was clipped, and I watched how it put her on edge, her back straightening. The woman tried to push the door closed.

My hand shot out, and the thud rang out, my hand stinging, but I did not wince. "In fact, I'm going to insist you let us see the children. Perhaps we might even decide to adopt one of the little angels," I drawled and put my hand on her shoulder, being mindful not to push too hard as I stepped over the threshold.

Jesper followed my lead, and I heard him chuckle under his breath. "This all feels a little dodgy," he commented, his hand resting on the small of my back as the woman tried to rush ahead of us.

"I agree," I muttered to him, standing straight as a needle when I felt his hand. "Just be careful. Whoever the John is that she mentioned could be dangerous, and it is best we do not stay too long."

"You're being awfully caring towards me, Kitty Cat," Jesper smirked. "People might think you actually care."

I elbowed his hip, and he groaned. "Focus."

"Yes, Your Majesty," he grunted, pushing me gently into the room where the woman had disappeared. We entered the dimly lit room, where three children sat with their heads down. They had no seats, just on the bare wooden floor. No rugs, no cushions. There was also no fire lit in the dingy room and no windows to let in any light.

The stench of bodily fluids was strong, and I dug my nails into my hand to prevent me from raising my hand to my nose.

The children did not raise their heads, even as we entered, and I whipped around to the woman who had walked back to the doorway.

"Explain what is going on here immediately," I demanded.

“They are being punished if ya must know, madam, not that it’s really your business,” the woman huffed.

The rage radiated from Jesper, and he gripped my arm tightly, pulling me around again. I hissed at first but realised just how serious he was when he spoke again. “They’re demon children,” he told me; nostrils flared.

I observed how little horns curved out of one child’s head, another with vibrant crimson hair, and the third with tiny black wings pointed out of their back. They were *mutated* demons.

Jesper stepped forward before I could latch onto him. His hand rested on the winged child’s head. Eventually, they moved their head, and a little girl’s eyes stared up at him. Her lips formed an ‘o’ shape as she took in the demon mark on his face as well as the golden eyes that had intrigued me on multiple occasions.

“It’s alright, child.” Jesper was calmer than I expected him to be. But the usual brightness in his voice was not there. “Would you tell me your name?”

“Alisna, sir.”

“Well, Alisna, could you tell me why you are being punished?” Jesper coerced, his hand ruffling her blonde curls. Her shoulders relaxed, and the other two children tried to peek.

“Because the goddesses do not love children like us.” It was the one with coloured hair that piped up, his hand moving to rest on Alisna’s shoulder. He must have been the oldest of the three as he started to take charge, but what was clear, was that he was the brother of Alisna. They shared the same vibrant green eyes. “My name is Jakob.”

“Who told you that about the goddesses, Jakob?” I asked them, turning to look over my shoulder at the pregnant woman. “Was it her?”

“Yes, madam,” the boy replied, cowering away when the woman glared at him. “It was Mrs Flitle.”

“A name finally,” I hummed and turned my entire body to the woman now. A man had joined her. He was plain looking, tall in stature, and balding.

“Mr Flitle I assume?” My eyes flickered to the hand he had rested on the woman’s rounded belly.

“What are you doing snooping around here?” the man grunted. “You have no business here. We don’t take donations.”

“Are you here to take us away?” Jakob asked, his arm wrapped around the other child that was still hunched over, too scared to look up.

“Keep your mouth shut, *demon*,” the man growled nastily, which was enough to make me take a step back at the force of his words. I could imagine just how terrified the children must be.

Clearing my throat, I narrowed my eyes. “This is an orphanage; you would be wise to treat these *children* better.” It threw me back into my own past, locked up in rooms without sunlight, without any fresh air. “Have you been testing on them? It is not a legal practice, and you could be arrested for such a crime.”

The man sneered, “No, they were dumped here by those that have tested on them. But there’s no hope for them now. We should have drowned them and saved ourselves the trouble.”

One more comment like that and I wouldn’t be able to control myself.

I could hear Jesper trying to calm the children down, whimpers filling the room. I was surprised Jesper had not thrown himself at the couple – I was close to doing so myself.

The rage continued to emanate from Jesper, even with our backs turned.

“You have very strong opinions about demons, man.” He did not deserve to be called by his name. Even if I were no demon, I was engaged to one. *Granted, it was under false pretences, but that didn’t matter.*

I could sympathise with what the children were going through being locked up here – *but to see them so mistreated just because they were considered different?* It had me wanting to attack the two people who stood in front of me.

“Are there any more being kept here?” I recalled what the woman had said at the door about the children. “You mentioned someone who brings the children here. Who are they?”

Mr Flitle scoffed, his grip tightening on his wife. “We don’t have to answer to you, and it’s best the two o’ you get out before I call the authorities. We don’t want no funny business.”

“You do answer to me,” I snapped, “and you would do well to answer my questions.” I was growing agitated and was willing to give up my identity to protect the children behind me. *I just wish someone had done the same when I was young.*

Mr Flitle stepped forward and tried to grab a hold of me, but I threw my arm out to prevent him. “Who are you anyway?” he snarled. “Queen

Catania?”

There was a beat where I did not reply.

Why did I hesitate when he asked?

“Yes, actually,” I growled and held up my hand where the royal signet ring shone on my index finger. Anyone would be able to recognise the Crimonian royal symbol – the moon and stars. “And those children are now under my care and any others that you have hidden away in the establishment.”

“I... I don’t believe you.” The man was panicking, eyes flickering to Jesper and then back to me. “No one important would never come to Sende. Royals stay in the capital–”

“Your Majesty!” a call came from the hallway, and I was grateful to Willen, who rushed through, almost knocking Mrs Flitle over as he barged through. “Are you well?” His eyes were so similar to Eriel’s at that moment, his sword drawn as he came to my side.

I felt comforted thinking of Eriel. He would have things under control.

Willen eyed the man and raised a sword up to his neck when he saw the threatening stance. “Do you need me to deal with him?”

“No, Will.” I shook my head and placed my fingers on his sword to make him lower it.

A little voice, unfamiliar, spoke. “Is she really the queen?” It must have been the third child, for it was not Jakob or Alisna.

“She is,” Jesper answered, his low tones soothing. “She will not allow these people to hurt you anymore, and neither will I.”

Something the two of us could agree on.

I felt his eyes burning into my back, and the hair on my body stood on end. I knew he was thinking the same thing.

The awful couple were beginning to mutter their apologies, begging for me to spare them. My blood ran cold as I thought of all that the children had been through. I didn’t want to give the Flitles my mercy. “I’ll ask you again. Who is bringing you the mutated demons?”

“I don’t know, Yer Majesty, I swear it on my child’s life!” Mrs Flitle gasped, her knees beginning to buckle.

I let out a bitter laugh. “How careless you are to swear on such a thing. What about you, Mr Flitle? Are you going to damn your unborn child’s life, too?”

The man's eyes darted about the room nervously. His wife was alarmed when she realised he knew something more than her, tugging on his shirt. "Just tell her, please!"

"You would be wise to do as your wife says," Willen cautioned, about to step forward, but I shook my head subtly at him. He had to let me handle it.

Willen looked put out that I would not let him take control, but he respected me enough to step back.

Eventually, Mr Flitle spoke up, "I don't know all the facts, Majesty, but Mr John has mentioned the Lord Olliea in passing..."

I raised my hands in triumph. "Ah, finally! Something useful comes out of your gross little mouth!"

Chapter Fifteen



“You were rather impressive earlier, Kitty Cat.”

Jesper was lounging on the velvety chaise in my chambers, picking at the bowl of red grapes he had requested before inviting himself inside.

He had bathed, as had I, when we returned from our trip. I stared at his attire, his white shirt draped open, revealing his bare chest – his skin smooth. My eyes lingered for a few more moments than would be considered proper.

I’d decided to wear a simple red gown, belted with a black sash, finding it easy to move in. It had also been one of my favourites before my rise to the throne. It had no pattern and was made of a very thin material, meaning it was nice when the weather became warm. The sleeves were a little puffy and buttoned at my wrist.

There was much for us to discuss. I’d just hoped that it could wait until the next day.

The children were taken from the orphanage with us. Two more mutated demon children were found upstairs in a similar room to the one we had discovered the first three in. They were all hungry, had tattered and dirty clothes, with clear marks of abuse on their skin. Jesper had taken charge, making sure the five of them got everything they needed when we returned to Henvale.

Jesper was a changed man in that moment. I'd felt awkward around the little ones, but he was so at ease, and able to calm their nerves. His eyes had been gentle as he crouched to speak to them – to make sure they knew their voices were heard.

It had been an odd sensation to stand in the doorway and watch on. I'd stared into the room where Alisna and Jakob had been taken when we arrived back at the castle, and I watched Jesper soothe them both to sleep. He told them a story about a pirate ship, which I presumed was taken from his own experience.

I found myself wanting him to tell me stories of it too. He was actually quite good at making people like him. I'd noticed it over the last few days. He would always speak animatedly to those he encountered, and aside from the Lords Olliea and Josephite, the court had started to warm to him.

Even me.

Leaning against the doorframe as I watched on, I'd taken a moment to think about how much it would mean to those children. To have a story told to them – to be cared for after so long of being mistreated.

The authorities of Sende were very little help when I had gone to report the Flitles. It was clear they knew what was going on the entire time and had not stopped it.

If I could burn the place down, I would have done it. An impulsive act I wanted to entertain but knew I could not.

With little else to do, I ordered the orphanage shut down. To avoid causing problems in the kingdom, I had to wait to imprison the evil couple. No matter what their belief, mistreating anyone was something I could not tolerate, and I would not let them live their lives without knowing the pain they had inflicted on those children.

Jesper cleared his throat, bringing us back to the present and back in my apartments. "Nothing to say, Kitty Cat?"

I nodded in response to Jesper's words. He was right. I'd never felt more in control than I had at that moment in the orphanage. *Even though I'd hesitated for a moment.*

Jesper snorted and threw a grape at my head, and I turned from my position where I was stoking the fire. I narrowed my eyes at the grinning man. "What was that for?"

"You weren't giving me your full attention." He blew a kiss to me.

“Why are you not eating the green ones?” I nodded to the bowl where he was picking around the green grapes.

Jesper screwed his nose up. “They’re disgusting, obviously. Taste like they came out of someone’s dirty sock.”

I raised an eyebrow mockingly at his tasteless description. “I think you’re delusional – they taste the same to me.”

He sniffed pretentiously. “You’re just wrong, Queenie.”

“I’m never wrong – I’m the *Queen*.”

“Keep telling yourself that, Kitty Cat.”

Arka knocked his snout against my knee, and I sat on my behind, rather than crouching on the balls of my feet. The wolf lay down with his head in my lap, happily wagging his tail as I ran my fingers through his fur.

“Are we going to talk about what happened earlier, then?” I asked Jesper, taking a couple of grapes from the dish. I popped two into my mouth, scrunching my face up as they were slightly sour. Grapes were not my favourite, but I was used to eating whatever I could get.

Jesper ate half a grape, the liquid on his lips distracting as he licked it off. “What part?”

“All of it. But first, we should start with the fact that we know Lord Olliea is one person who is funding the mutating of demons in Crimone. It was someone that worked for him that sent those children to the orphanage and into the care of those crazy people.”

Nodding slowly, some of Jesper’s damp hair fell from his short ponytail. “I have a feeling that we know who is the one mutating.”

“We do?” I asked, feeling left out. I found it hard to admit that I didn’t understand, but the mutating of demons was something we could not let develop. All of Eden’s aggression about my engagement made sense now. The Olliea family was clearly rallying against the demons.

Jesper nodded, and Arka huffed as if it were obvious. “Sir Siwel Gates.”

My eyes widened. I had no idea where he was pulling that idea from. “But he’s married to your mother!”

“Exactly. It’s what makes her even worse.” His words were bitter, and he sucked on the grape in his mouth, cheeks slightly puffed out. He looked child-like at that moment, a boy who had been heartbroken by someone who should have loved him unconditionally. A resentful feeling rose in my own throat, as I knew it was another thing we shared. Jesper sighed, rolling

his neck until it let out a satisfying click. “But I always wondered if he was behind it, and now I have my proof.”

Glad he did not wait for me to try to work it out, he continued, “When I was putting the children to bed earlier, Jakob described what he remembered of the mutation, poor thing. It sounded traumatic.” He sighed, genuinely weighed down but I what he’d heard. “Those children weren’t born with their mutation like I was. They were taken from their homes when their parents passed and were tested on before being abandoned there when the mutators had found out what they wanted.” Disgust was evident on his face, and I felt a similar feeling in my stomach. “But he described Siwel to me in detail. He recalled his face.”

“I could have him arrested then,” I commented, leaning back on my free hand. “However, should we leave it until the joust? We could find a way to have Jakob identify him there?”

“Lord Olliea would get away with it all. I doubt Siwel would give the man up,” Jesper mused, throwing a grape up and catching it perfectly in his mouth with a satisfied hum.

I thought it was strange that his mother would marry a man who tested on men like the father of her child. I had no reason to believe that his hatred towards her was anything but justified. A small part of me could understand what being a woman in a wealthy family was like. She would be used as a pawn, and this might be an example of that.

As for Siwel, I would come up with a plan for him on my own, not sure I could trust Jesper not to go too far when it came to the man. Jesper had been calm today with the children, but I’d seen his anger on the island and when we were in Naever.

“What will we do with the children?” I asked him, changing the subject so he would not ask me more about the joust.

I’d given Eriel quite the task when we got back – to organise the joust to be in a week. All invites would be sent out to those eligible to compete, and the monetary reward had been settled on. A fat sum of 50,000 crians. It was enough to live off of for years without having to lift a finger.

Jesper turned onto his side, resting his head on his hand as he watched me seductively. One of his legs was bent at the knee, and his other hand played with a button on his shirt. I wondered what it would be like to paint the man, mixing the colours of his smooth skin and the deep red of his

thick hair. Or how his eyes would shine back at me on a canvas, not sure if I would be able to convey the glint in them.

I did not realise he had spoken until he reached down from the sofa and flicked my nose with his finger. “Kitty Cat, did you hear me?” He tutted when I shook my head and asked him to repeat himself. “I said that the children will be sent to a safe home. Riddel has contacts whom we can trust that will care for them.”

I forgot, for a moment, that he had been searching for a cure longer than I had. Of course he would have had provisions set up for those who needed them. I’d not even thought of something like that.

Arka shifted in my lap before getting up to stroll to the other side of the room, having had enough petting for the time being. I watched the wolf, turning my head back when I heard Jesper move from the chaise.

My eyes widened when I felt his slightly rough hand cup my cheek, and his thumb brushed along my cheek bone slowly. He was kneeling in front of me, towering over my seated form.

“Your mark,” I blurted, raising my hand to touch my fingers to his inked skin, tracing the shape of the line. “It changed...”

He closed his eyes briefly, as if he was savouring my touch. “You noticed.” Jesper chuckled low, as his fingers stroked against my neck, and I realised just how large his hand was against my face – his entire hand cupping the side of it. “It’s part of the mutation. It changes when I...”

“When what?” I asked, curious to know what caused it to shift. His hesitation also made me want to probe more, to understand it all. “Is it like magic, if it changes?”

He shrugged my first question off. “Demons have some magic in them, so yes. It’s what makes us different to humans. It’s exactly like the myths about old magic, but we can’t practice like sorcerers. It’s just a part of our features.”

“I haven’t heard it explained like that before.” The news had surprised me. I’d always been curious about what made up demons, not realising that it was magic that made them different from us until recently.

“Now, let’s talk about you not listening to me. I think that deserves a punishment.”

Scoffing, I moved a hand to hold his wrist. “Who are you to give me a punishment?”

“Your fiancé,” he answered simply, voice dripping with longing. I gulped, and he smirked. His hungry gaze trailed over my face, my skin heating up at the intimate action.

“It’s not real, this relationship you have invented. I’m letting this farce go on for the security you bring me at the moment,” I muttered, hoping I sounded convincing. I pulled his hand off of my face and placed it on his lap, patting it. “Nothing more.”

Jesper raised an eyebrow, initially stunned. Then his lips formed a wicked smile, and he hooked a hand behind my head before pushing me onto my back on the fur rug.

His other hand rested beside my head, and it kept him above me as he placed his legs on either side of my own. At this angle, I could see straight down his shirt, his muscled physique exactly as I had imagined it to be. His toned abdominal muscles were evident on his firm body, and I gulped as I trailed my eyes back up to his.

My thoughts of the man were anything but pure, and I knew there was tension there. I could not allow myself to be tempted by it.

He still might betray me.

“My sweet, I didn’t believe a word that just came out of your pretty little mouth.” His eyes twinkled. “Perhaps I might be able to taste the truth in it.”

I gasped as his lips trailed along my jaw, my heart thundering in my chest as he kissed my chin.

My body tingled as he ghosted his lips over mine, staring into my eyes as he waited for something... it took me a moment to realise it was permission he was seeking.

Placing my hands on his chest, I shoved him off me. As much as I wanted him to smash his soft-looking lips on mine I couldn’t. *I wouldn’t.*

He fell back and landed against the side of the dark blue chaise; his eyes glued to my face. Jesper still smirked. “Alright, Kitty Cat. Message received.” The disbelief flickered in his eyes, but he did not push me further.

I was disappointed but at least he was respectful.

My body was begging me to pull him back against me, run my fingers through his waves, and explore every part of the exquisite man. However, I just cleared my throat.

“I think it’s time for bed,” I muttered, rising up off the floor. I needed to move far away from the temptation of the man draped over my chaise with his inviting face and promises of a good night.

“Is that an invitation?” Jesper maintained his smirk, eyes sparkling with amusement and desire.

I grabbed a plush cushion from the chaise and threw it at his face as his melodic laughter filled the room.

Chapter Sixteen



Eriel rushed into my tent, a little out of breath, Willen not far behind him. His twin was not as tired, and he patted Eriel on the back.

“Good afternoon, Your Majesty,” Willen greeted, but Eriel straightened up to convey his news.

I bowed my head politely to Willen and chuckled at the wheezing Eriel. “What has you rushing about?”

Eriel rolled his eyes, pointing his finger in my direction. “I’m trying to make sure *your* bloody joust goes well.” His words made me smirk, the squire helping me into my armour was left horrified at the tone my second in command had taken with me.

Sometimes, Eriel forgot I was the Queen of Crimone. *But I was glad about that.*

“You told me you had it under control,” I countered, amused. “If you can’t handle it...”

“Don’t be ridiculous. I’m good at what I do.” He put his hands on his hips. “But your future husband is what I don’t have under control.”

I snorted, knowing that even Jesper didn’t have himself under control. “What has he done now?”

Jesper had spent the last week making my life as difficult as he could. Surprisingly, we had spent a lot of time with one another, whether that be riding to another local town or pretending to plan for the wedding. He

would visit my chambers in the evenings, mostly. People would probably frown upon it, but he had been quite well-behaved most of the time.

We mainly spoke about how to deal with the mutators when we knew no one was around to listen to us.

Jesper was passionate about ending it, and I found his arguments convincing. Not that I needed to be convinced much.

I already believed it was wrong.

But, despite the positives of our time together, Jesper was acting suspiciously.

I'd caught him and Riddel snooping about the halls late at night, but they clearly had not found what they were looking for. Was it to do with the cure? I couldn't be sure. I was lucky that he and Eriel had yet to spend any time together, as I was certain my dearest friend would not like my choice of fiancée. I still had yet to tell the truth to Eriel about it being a fake arrangement.

Jesper had not told me what he knew about my parents. I knew he was still trying to secure a long engagement, worried I would back out if I found out before then.

Which he was completely right about. If I could get out of the engagement, I would. To be shackled down by someone after only just gaining my freedom was bothering me.

Despite this, I found that I couldn't hate Jesper. Not when he looked at me with his warm gaze and made me forget my purpose.

"The Fox has only gone and started a fight with Lord Josephite. You really do know how to pick them, Cat," Eriel said, interrupting my thoughts.

"I can't leave him on his own for five seconds," I growled, waving my arm to stop the squire from finishing his job. I stomped out of the tent with the armour strapped to me, my limbs heavier with the added weight.

Eriel and Willen rushed behind me. "Do you want to know what it is about, or are you happy to rush in unprepared?" Eriel criticised, catching up to me.

Despite his rushing around, his clothes were neat, crisp almost. There was not a part out of place. He was a man who usually could not stand mess, and that applied to every aspect of his life. *Apart from his wild hair, of course. And when I overburdened him.*

“Spit it out quickly,” I told him, not having time to dwell on anything for too long. We passed through the other tents, where the competitors would be readying themselves. The grass was slightly damp under my feet, and I was careful not to slip.

I was already being humiliated enough with whatever Jesper was up to, without falling on my ass.

Eriel tutted. “So rude,” he said, before continuing, “Josephite made a comment about his mark. Said it was an evil mark and that the goddesses had cursed him because he was born out of wedlock.”

Lord Josephite had returned with his son for the joust. I thought it was just so that he and Olliea could join forces. Having them in the same place had its dangers, but it was easier to keep an eye on them both.

Olliea would be on the hunt for his son’s killer too – and I had a funny feeling that Jesper had something to do with it.

I couldn’t prove it. It was just a gut feeling. The way he had reacted the day we were in Naever and with the knowledge that Olliea had connections to the mutators were the only real motives he had. He would have every reason to want the man to suffer.

Part of me wondered if he might have acted out for me – for what happened in the corridor with Eden. My heart longed for someone to care for me in that way, but I knew it could never be. I was not meant to be adored – I was meant to be revered. *That* was my purpose.

“Jesper would have loved that, surely?” I asked, frowning. Jesper relished in insults, always quick to throw one back. Or at least that was what I had witnessed on many occasions and been the victim of.

At least he was usually consistent. He was easier to read like that.

“Well...” Willen grimaced, “this time he might have gone a step too far. Lord Ulara claims to have...” His skin had gone ashen, wringing his hands. The poor man was clearly conflicted about how to tell me. “Spotted Lord Josephite with... some gentleman friends.”

I raised an eyebrow at this as I turned my head to him, waiting for him to elaborate.

He fiddled with his collar, clearing his throat. “Sleeping with a random man, Cat.”

So, Josephite was an adulterous toad. Good to know.

Realisation dawned on me, and I recognised how serious this would be. “What has possessed Ulara!?” I cried out, frustrated at him for creating a

mess I would have to fix on his behalf. “Do his words have any truth to them? Could he really have caught Josephite?”

I did not care how uncomfortable the topic was making the two men, both of them unable to meet my gaze. I hated their politeness sometimes. When we were young, they never would have cringed at such a thing. It was Willen that spoke, “Josephite is discreet with his interactions, Your Majesty. However, it is possible that Lord Ulara could have seen him.”

“Right. Brilliant. That’s just fucking perfect, isn’t it? Did neither of you think to pull him away before he got out of control?” I snapped.

“I’m not a governess,” Eriel snorted.

“Pity. You would look lovely in a dress,” I replied, sarcastically.

I heard Willen cough as he covered up a chuckle and spotted Jesper immediately as we walked out onto the sand where the list field was. The red-haired man stood out. The wicked smirk he wore was too enchanting for his own good, and a sword was pointed up at his neck as he towered over Lord Josephite.

“What is going on here?” I called across, furiously. My hands were balled into fists as I stalked over to them. “This is meant to be a celebratory event, and you dare to start fighting?”

The crowd bowed as I made my presence known, all apart from the two arguing men.

“Your Majesty, you would do well to tame your future husband,” Lord Josephite spat in Jesper’s direction, his sword falling to his side after my words.

“That sounds rather exciting,” Jesper teased, smiling at the man, and his eyes flickering to me. “What do you say, *light-of-my-life*?”

His words were a reminder. I had to calm myself, otherwise, people would suspect our relationship.

Taking a deep breath, I tried to stop the side of me that wanted to yell at him. His golden eyes shimmered with affection, and for a moment, nothing else mattered. Jesper had the ability to make my knees feel weak just from one stare. It was as though I were bare to him, and he could see all of me, every little secret I had – all exposed.

And he knew exactly what he was doing.

“I apologise on behalf of my fiancé, Lord Josephite. He will *also* apologise to you.” I smiled sweetly at Jesper, fully aware that he would hate the very idea.

Jesper sniffed, pouting like a child who had been told off.

“I don’t want his bloody apology,” Lord Josephite snapped, his face growing red. “That man should be sent back to that island he’s from – and to take those spies with him!”

Spies? He had to mean Kalline and Riddel. But I knew that Kalline did not often leave the other ladies, as she had been making the dresses they had all asked for whenever I spotted her. Due to my kind nature, I had let the gesture slide, despite my orders for her to be my dressmaker – and mine alone.

It suddenly occurred to me that there had been another person in the room on the last night I had my last encounter with Eden.

I attempted to look around without being caught, wondering if I might spot someone lurking close by.

“Again, I can only offer my apologies then, Lord Josephite. We really need to be getting on with the event now,” I announced, giving him no more of my time, and scowling at Jesper as I turned to go back to my tent to finish getting ready.

Eriel was close by my side once more as I stalked away. “Well handled, Cat. You did the right thing. But that was rather interesting about the spies.”

“I agree. We need to keep an eye on his entourage,” I told him. “Keep me informed.”

He chuckled quietly at this. “I’m actually quitting my job to become a governess. It will probably be easier than taking orders from you.”

I narrowed my eyes as I looked at him. “I can’t wait to see you in a gown.”

Eriel pretended to tuck a curl behind his ear, fluttering his eyelashes. “I know.”



“Whoever wins the tournament will crown their Queen of the Flowers,” I declared from atop Joy, the visor of my helmet up as I addressed the crowd. I could spot my ladies-in-waiting gathered in the stands, all of them hoping to be the lucky one picked.

The Queen of the Flowers was an honour – I could understand their excitement. I remembered my father often boasting about how my mother had always been chosen, known for her beauty throughout the kingdom.

Pity they did not see her ugly personality. Cold and heartless when it came to those in the castle, she was not as beautiful as they might have thought. *She and my father had made a good pair, at least.*

When the applause died down, I stated that the tournament would begin. I watched with the other contenders as the first two competitors took their turn, and this continued for a few rounds before my turn arrived.

“Queen Catania!” my adversary called to me from across the field, both of us securing ourselves. “Any last words before I knock you from your horse?”

The man was not known to me, but Eriel had explained that he was one of the lesser lords of Crimone. He was fresh and handsome by Crimonian standards – he even had a lot of the women cheering him on. Lord Halle was still a bachelor too and had been unable to attend the ball the night Jesper and I had become engaged.

I might have entertained him if he had been in attendance.

“Only that you should be ready to eat dirt, Lord Halle!” I called back, gaining a cheer from the crowd. *How many of them were sincere?* I was glad my helmet hid my expression, where my lips were pulled into a line.

Once we were both in position, I dug my heels in so that Joy would move forward, satisfied with the speed we started off at.

It was hardly a competition, with the man falling backwards on his horse as soon as my lance hit his shield, the force breaking through and shattering the tip. This happened once more and on the third round, I knocked him clean from his horse. The dust from the sand circled around us, and I noticed he stayed still, shocked.

I rode towards the end, the people cheering their queen, and I felt a warmth in my stomach at the satisfaction. I gave Joy a gentle pat when my lance was taken from me. “Good girl, Joy,” I whispered to her.

Dismounting, I went to check that the young man was alright. Lord Halle stood up when I approached, brushing himself off and removing his helmet.

“I am well, Your Majesty. You are very talented on that horse of yours,” he chuckled, speaking in his thick northern accent, as he flashed a charming smile in my direction.

“Thank you, Lord Halle. I hope that you will not blame me for wanting to win.” I smirked, patting his back once.

The man chuckled good-naturedly. “Not at all, Majesty. It is an honour to lose to you.”

I found I smiled beneath my helmet before moving back to the side where Eriel and Willen were waiting.

“Lord Ulara is next,” Willen informed me as I handed him my helmet, Eriel offering me some wine – which I gratefully took a gulp of. The liquid was stronger than I expected, and I made a face, not one to handle my drink well.

I turned to watch Jesper, rolling my eyes as he blew me a kiss from a top Mirris. He looked very fine in his black armour, a fox etched into the breastplate and on his shield.

The unknown competitor was nothing in comparison. They had their back to me, and I did not recognise their horse or the house symbol on the shield that was being handed to them.

“Do you think he will win, Cat?” Eriel muttered, watching my fiancé wave to his adoring fans – mainly my ladies – watching. The men were not so impressed by him or his showmanship.

“He told me he’s never been in a joust before.” I shrugged but was slightly hopeful. “However, he is comfortable on top of his horse, so

perhaps.”

Their rounds began, and I watched them ride towards one another, neither making a significant enough hit. I could feel my heart beating faster in my chest, wondering who the winner would be. Jesper still sat straight up, not deterred by the first turn.

They both turned to charge again, lances pointed towards one another. I felt the air getting trapped in my throat when Jesper was thrown off his horse – so violently that he flipped over and landed on his front.

There was a mixture of cheers and boos from the crowd. The unknown competitor had stopped and dismounted, moving over to Jesper’s side and using their foot to kick him onto his back.

“Demon Scum,” the figure spat behind their helmet.

I felt cramped between the twins, their arms brushing mine as they tried to prevent me from dashing forward. Willen gripped my wrist as I tried to push past them. “This could be a planned attack on you, Your Majesty.” His eyes were imploring me to stay still. There was a flicker there, of what I didn’t know, but I could have sworn it was resentment.

“One of you go and help him, *now*,” I hissed, shoving their hands away from me, feeling trapped in that moment. If the figure was trying to harm me, I would be ready, but Jesper was not moving from his place in the sand – which concerned me greatly.

Letting out a heavy sigh, Eriel rushed over to the man, along with the physician. Lord Olliea was smug as he walked over to join them, his hand moving to rest on the unknown rider’s shoulder.

Willen was occupied giving orders to some of his men, so I took my chance and pushed past his arm to run over to the small crowd. He called after me, but I ignored him.

I found Jesper infuriating, but the idea of him being hurt had my limbs moving without permission, and I fell to my knees in the sand at his side. His helmet had been removed, and his hair was sprawled out on the sand, his bangs clinging to the side of his face. He was paler than usual, golden eyes closed.

My heart was beating fast enough that my chest was beginning to hurt. I tried not to show it on my face, though.

“What’s wrong with him?” I asked, my voice tight, as my hand moved below his head to cup it in the hopes that it might rouse him.

“He’s had a nasty knock to the head, Your Majesty.” The Physician frowned deeply. “I think he will also have some bruising from the hit, but I will need to take a better look to see if any bones are broken.”

Glaring over my shoulder to where Willen and his men were now preventing Olliea and the unknown man from leaving, I snarled, “Who are you?”

“No one of importance, Your Majesty,” Lord Olliea answered, haughtily.

“I demand you tell me,” I snarled, spit flying from my mouth. *I was frantic.*

Eriel cleared his throat from where he was crouched beside the physician. “Would you like Sir Swan to arrest them, My Queen? For attempted murder.”

Olliea looked alarmed at this. “The demon fell. You can’t prove that it was done on purpose.”

“Everyone saw your friend kicking him and insulting him,” I spat, fingers gripping Jesper’s hair a little in my anger, forgetting it might hurt him. “So, you would do well to tell me his name.”

The crowd was murmuring, each trying to lean and get a better view of what was unfolding on the field. At least they would believe that there was a strong relationship developing between the ‘happy’ royal couple, even if my care for him on this occasion was genuine.

If he made it through this, I would make sure to be nicer to him. I swore by the goddesses I would.

“Her name is quite familiar to you, Queenie.” It was Jesper’s deep voice that spoke, his eyes fluttering open, and his lips curled into a beautiful smile that would leave anyone breathless.

This man would be the death of me.

I stared at him for a moment, surprised, as he pushed himself onto his forearms. A part of me wanted to throw my arms around him, pleased he did not seem injured any longer, but the other wanted me to smack his good-looking face and give him a piece of my mind. He continued before I could act, “But they were not hired by Olliea, *she* was hired by me.”

The helmet was removed to reveal Riddel beneath. Her long hair was braided and twisted into two small buns on either side of her head, and a little squished. She hooked the helmet under her arm, smirking, as she bowed head politely to the two of us – before shaking off Olliea’s hand. The man was too stunned to move.

“I don’t understand...” Lord Olliea trembled.

“I knew you would try something,” Jesper said steadily, sitting up properly. “So, my dear friend swapped with your hired man. Although, I really didn’t expect you to hit me that hard, Riddy.” He grunted as his hand rubbing his side.

“Apologies, My Lord, but it had to look realistic,” Riddel joked, before pointing to the tent she had come from. “I tied up the man who was meant to compete in there, Your Majesty. I’m sure you will want to interrogate him.”

“Thank you, Riddel. Sir Swan, go and find out who his patron was.”

Why did I feel so out of my depth? Every second something else happened, and I could feel myself spiralling. I wondered if this is what it took to be a royal, pretending to understand everything that was going on and that you had it all under control.

And thinking that Jesper had been hurt was probably not helping my confused brain.

The colour drained from Lord Olliea’s face, and he already knew the man would give him up in a heartbeat. “Your Majesty.” He cleared his throat. “Might I speak with you in private?”

I let him wait for my decision, turning to Jesper who was brushing the sand out of his hair. *Had I truly been worried about losing the man in front of me? Had I already formed the attachment I was desperately trying to avoid?*

“Yes,” I answered my own thoughts.

Jesper looked surprised at this, his hand pausing midway through his hair. “My sweet?”

The simple words had sent a flutter through me. Instead of replying, I stood up and moved to the lord, who was practically quivering as I stared at him. “Spit it out. You can say whatever you need to say to me right here. If you are honest, perhaps I can spare the damage to your family name.”

A lie, but it wouldn’t hurt to pretend to give him something. I did not owe the man anything, and I wanted desperately for the event to be over. I’d embarrassed Lord Olliea enough as it was, and the realisation that I might have grown too fond of Jesper was making me want to run away and lock myself in a dark room.

It was a mutter when he responded, but enough for me to hear. “I hired him, Your Majesty.”

I leaned forward, tilting my head mockingly. “You hired who?”

“An... an assassin.” His shoulders shook, and I could have sworn the tears were forming in his dull eyes. His monocle was dangling from the chain. “I just wanted to avenge my boy. I know that... *that demon killed him!*” His voice soared towards the end, his emotions getting the better of him as every second went by.

He fell to his knees before me, begging for me to spare him, his hand clutched hold of mine. It was sweaty and rough, and I scoffed – disgusted.

To think I’d not needed to plan a trap for him at all. I envisioned the whole thing going much differently, but it had been my mistake to not realise Olliea would try to harm Jesper in the event. I was slowly learning I could not plan for everything, no matter how hard I tried. The world did not revolve around my ideas.

Snatching my hand away from the sobbing man, I turned my head to the people who had gone silent and as they recognised something far more sinister was in play. A part of me wanted to arrest Lord Olliea and lock away the key.

And yet, I was still feeling frustrated that Jesper had not involved me in what was going on. He was keeping his secrets, and now I would keep mine.

“Lord Olliea is still grieving his son, everyone. Please excuse his behaviour,” I declared, not meeting Jesper’s questioning gaze. I placed my hands on Olliea’s shoulders, doing my best to keep my revulsion for the man hidden as I helped him up.

He was startled, the tears staining his cheeks. “Your Majesty?” he choked.

“Remember this,” I murmured to him, my hand patting his cheek. “I will call upon you to retrieve the favour you now owe me.” Without allowing him to reply, I stormed past the people who were waiting for my explanation. “Continue!”

The rest of the event went ahead as planned. Olliea was under my thumb, and I knew he was truly shaken by the idea that I could punish him at any time, along with the remainder of his family.

However, it had not sorted the problem of his funding of the mutations. But that was how I could make use of him when I had a thought-out plan. I needed to make sure *everyone* involved paid for their crimes.

In the final event, it was to be Sir Siwel and myself who would compete.

I felt calm as we waited to be told to start. My visor was down, and I observed the way Sir Siwel smiled before lowering his own. The man sent shivers down my spine, and suddenly I felt uneasy.

Every fibre of my being wanted to knock the man off and make him eat dirt.

My breathing was heavy, filling the helmet with hot air as I tried to keep it even. My fingers tightened around the lance and the reins. *I would knock him off.*

I had to let my anger out somehow.

I rode fast when the trumpet blew to signal the start, and I kept my eyes on the man riding towards me. He seemed relaxed in comparison, and I tried to calm myself so that I would not make a rookie mistake.

Learning to joust had been something Eriel had rushed to teach me. I flourished under his teachings, and even Willen had praised me on the occasions he had seen my training.

But until today, I had also never taken part in an official joust.

I grunted as I gripped my shield tighter when it was hit, glad that my lance also landed against Sir Siwel's. The same happened on the second charge against one another, the damage even.

The anger bubbled inside of me as I saw him wave to the crowd to elicit cheers for him. He pushed his visor up for a moment to cheer with them, his charismatic attitude grating on me in every way.

Why did they like him so much anyway?

I glanced at where Posy was standing with Jakob, Alisna, and the other children. We had informed Posy of what we needed to know from the boy, and she was to stay alert. I had been sceptical about telling her at first, but Riddel assured me the woman was completely trustworthy.

Jakob was unable to tear his gaze away from Sir Siwel. He must have recognised him – as he tugged on Posy's arm, and she bent down to listen to him. I watched her look around until her gentle gaze settled on me and she nodded.

Jesper was right. Sir Siwel really was a part of the mutation scandal.

The trumpet was blown for the final time, and I let out a loud yell as I moved as fast as Joy would carry me, the lance snapping with a loud crack as I made contact. Then there was a thud as Siwel toppled from his stallion.

“Queen Catania is our champion!” I could hear the announcement as I stayed put, breathing heavily as Sir Siwel pushed himself up. His weather-beaten face was sweaty, but his smile revealed he was impressed when he removed the helmet, clutching his lower back as he was helped to his feet.

“You have quite the talent, Your Majesty. I had not thought...”

“That I would win?” I asked bluntly.

Sir Siwel chuckled, shaking his head. “It was a deserved win; I am sure you wanted to show that the royal family is untouchable.” He was prying, wanting to know my thoughts about what had happened before with Lord Olliea. “Your fiancé must be proud.”

I was agitated when he mentioned Jesper. Whatever had occurred between the two of them was unpleasant, and I did not appreciate Sir Siwel’s tone.

“We are untouchable, Sir Siwel. *You* would do well to remember that,” I answered, sharply.

The confusion on his face was there for a flicker of a second before he plastered the smile back onto his face.

“Oh, I will not forget it, Your Majesty. I will not make the same mistake again,” Sir Siwel responded, and my eyes narrowed, the words triggering a memory.

“Your Majesties, you have made a grave mistake tonight, and you will pay for it. I will not make the same mistake again.”

I’d certainly heard Sir Siwel’s grating voice before, and it was not somewhere it should have been. *Could it have been in the room on that night my whole world changed for a second time?*

“No words, Majesty? Perhaps one of your loyal dogs may want to defend your honour.” Sir Siwel smirked cruelly, gesturing to the group of men that had formed around me.

Willen was the first to draw his sword, and Eriel looked ready to do the same. I waved my hand to stop them, speaking coolly, “Watch your tongue, Sir. Or I might have to let one of my *loyal dogs* remove it for you.”

“Maybe they are not as loyal as you might think. You should watch your back – always sleep with one eye open, for you do not want to leave your back unguarded with such leeches in your household.” Sir Siwel stroked his well-kept beard, and his green eyes flittered between the men, to my ladies, and then finally back to me.

My stomach sank. “Don’t believe a word he says, Cat. No one would dare betray you,” Eriel cut in quickly, shaking his soft brown curls around as he moved his head.

I did not wait for him to say anything else, turning around so that I could address the crowd. “The monetary prize will be given to a charitable cause of my choosing.”

My mind was elsewhere as the crowd was cheering, and I accepted a new lance and the flower crown on the end of it so that I could pick the Queen of the Flowers.

Picking instantly, the crowd were surprised when I brushed past the ladies, hesitating for a moment too long at Lady Mirana. Her face lit up, and she bowed her head to accept it.

Not going to happen. Not after what her father had pulled.

I smirked wickedly before I settled the crown in the lap of the unsuspecting Posy. The red-haired woman’s cheeks were as bright as her hair, but the toothy grin she gave me, made my stomach flutter.

I found myself smiling too.

“Lady Posy, Queen of the Flowers!”

The women all congratulated Posy, aside from Mirana who was looking flushed, her glare burning into the side of my face.

“Maybe next time, My Lady,” I muttered to her snidely.

If there was a next time.

I had more pressing matters to attend to – and I would start by finding out who was betraying me.

Chapter Seventeen



The water soaked my aching limbs, and I sunk further into its warmth, letting it hit below my chin. I opened my eyes, the flower petals in the water the first detail I focused on, the bright reds and pinks a stark contrast to the cloudy water.

I don't know what salts were placed in the bath, but it smelt divine. I never knew what to ask for, so was glad I didn't have to ask for the bath to be drawn up when I arrived in my apartments after the joust. It had already been organised.

There had been so much to deal with after my win that I'd not even thought of. Without Eriel guiding my every move, I would have been lost.

Maybe he guides your every move to further his own gain. Your loyal dog may not be so loyal.

"Shut up," I muttered to myself.

After crowning Posy, everyone gathered in the hall to celebrate. A banquet was held, and all the while I thought about wanting to rush upstairs and shut myself away. Jesper had not joined as I'd insisted he go and be attended to by the physician properly.

The time apart had allowed me to develop my frustrated thoughts. I felt cheated by his scheme with Riddel and, more than anything, felt foolish.

The silence in the my apartments, however, was bliss.

I'd sent everyone away, wanting to be alone with my bruised feelings.

Something important else had happened at the banquet. As I picked at my food, glancing around at the people enjoying themselves, I spotted a figure standing to one side. They were beside Riddel's chair, the two of them muttering quietly to one another.

I could not see their face due to the hood they wore, but they were a little curvy and not very tall. I noticed they moved with a quick speed to give Riddel their information before disappearing again.

They must have been the other spy that Josephite had been referring to.

Olliea looked pale for the rest of the evening, placed to my right. I decided it would be best to keep an eye on the man.

Sir Siwel vanished after the joust, and I doubted if he knew that I was on to his scheming. I'd taken a moment to speak with Jakob myself, and he had confirmed Sir Siwel's involvement – that the man had visited the orphanage once with the usual Mr John.

All the information of the day made my head pound, and I was grateful that it appeared to be fading the more I relaxed. Although, I could not shift the agitation that had settled within me after Sir Siwel's words.

My peace was interrupted as a hand came to rest over my mouth. I made to leap out of the tub, hand reaching to grab at the arm in my eye-line. The hand pressed me back firmly, to prevent any movement.

"Don't worry, Kitty Cat. It's just your future husband." Jesper's melodic voice made my shoulders ease. Just a fraction. His hand moved from my neck to stroke over my collarbone beneath the water.

I was so comforted by his presence that I didn't bother to correct him.

"How long have you been in here?" I muttered breathlessly, turning my head slowly to meet his golden gaze, where he was settled beside the tub. His armour was replaced with a black ensemble, an open shirt, and leather trousers. I was glad he had not tied his hair back, leaving me to admire the messy style.

Chuckling, his breath tickled my face at our proximity. "Only a few minutes. You had your eyes closed, my sweet. I was rather surprised; did you doze off?"

Mortified, my cheeks flushed, and I moved to sit up, realising now how much the clouded water did not hide. "You should have knocked; I would have dried off and let you in... probably," I murmured the last part as an afterthought, not sure I could face speaking to him.

“I get the feeling you’re angry at me, Kitty Cat.” Jesper smirked, flicking some water with his fingers towards my face. “Do tell me what I did wrong so I can make it right.”

“I’m not,” I snapped, a little too quickly. I’d managed to wrap my arms around my legs now, which were drawn up to my chest.

“Ah...” He clicked his fingers, and the smile that was *oh-so* enchanting formed on his soft lips. “You’re upset because I didn’t tell you about my plan, aren’t you?” Jesper didn’t wait for me to answer, letting out a small sigh. “I couldn’t tell you otherwise your reaction would not be genuine, you understand, don’t you? And you hadn’t told me if you had a plan to catch that bastard for his crimes, therefore, I took matters into my own hands.”

Did he not think me capable?

With a frown I turned to him, our noses almost brushing as I gripped the side of the tub, my body still partially hidden beneath the water. His eyes flickered down, and I moved my hand to tap his chin, his gaze darting back to mine.

“I think you’ve forgotten, but I’m the Queen of Crimone, Utara. You answer to me when you’re in my kingdom. I am the one who makes the decisions around her.” I wanted to say the words with conviction, but they came out hesitant. I could lie to everyone else, but not when it came to him.

I felt shy. It was the way his stare made me feel I could hide nothing. Not even when I wanted to try.

“Are you sure about that, Kitty Cat?” Jesper was sultry as he whispered the words, his index finger brushing down my nose slowly, the water on his finger leaving a small trail there.

I caught his wrist in my hand, watching him. “I will call off this arrangement if you’re going to undermine me.” I wanted him to realise the severity of my words. He had embarrassed me by having Riddel reveal herself in front of everyone – and for it to be so clear that I didn’t know what was going on.

“You can’t. I have the information you need.” His taunting smile made me scowl, my hand coming to land against his cheek, the slap resounding throughout the room. I felt my skin tingle and could recall what it felt like when I was on the receiving end of a slap. I could still remember the sharp pain that spread across the side of my face.

“I shouldn’t...have done that.” I admitted, clearing my throat. I observed him as he brought his hand up to cover his cheek. “However, I don’t need your information if you’re going to continue to act without telling me. This is meant to be a deal for the both of us.”

A whimper left my lips when his hand shot out, and he gripped my jaw as he stood up, leaning over the tub. Goosebumps formed over my skin as half of my body was pulled from the water to be hit with chilly air.

It wasn’t painful... it was just thrilling.

Jesper’s handsome face was close to mine. My fingers gripped the edge of the tub, trying desperately not to give in and hold on to him. I did not miss the way his eyes flickered from my face, lips parting ever so slightly as he gazed at my body, before rising back to my face.

“Oh, Kitty Cat,” he muttered. “I like it when you’re rough with me. But you’re making a mistake. I have far more than just some silly information about what happened to your parents. That was just all I was willing to tell you when we first met.”

“What else then?” I whispered, his lips brushing close to mine but never quite touching. I wanted to steal a kiss, forget all propriety, and embrace the danger.

The smile he gave me was treacherous, his mouth wide, showing his teeth. “I know who you really are, or more specifically, *who you aren’t.*”

I could have sworn my heart stopped beating at that moment.

My whole world could come crumbling down if Jesper chose to utter the words to my enemies. *Maybe he already had. Is that what he told Josephite?*

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” I said, trying to keep myself composed.

Tilting his head, the man was quiet for a moment.

My research on Jesper had come to nothing, and I’d no leverage other than the arrangement we had made. I hated that he had all the power in the situation. I was so used to being the powerless one, and it infuriated me.

I already knew what words he was going to say. I wanted to stop him but could not find the words.

Maybe when he said it, I would feel differently about him – that I could find it within me to hate him.

“I know your real name is Cate,” Jesper spoke low, his free hand brushing up my arm, the warmth spreading throughout my body. His

pupils were large, and I wondered what was going on in his head, wishing I could work him out for once. But he always kept me guessing.

The name was unknown to my ears now, apart from when Jesper had mentioned it the other day. It still sent a shudder down my spine, and I tensed, beginning to shiver.

“No,” I whispered.

“Don’t lie, my sweet, there’s no point.” He shook his head. “I already have proof that it’s true. Your claim to the Crimonian throne is about as good as a mine,”

The comparison made me glare, and his golden eyes shimmered with amusement. “What proof?” Perhaps there was no point pretending anymore.

“A very reliable source confirmed it for me on my arrival here, but I already had my suspicions,” Jesper answered, his finger ghosting over my collarbone and then down between my breasts. I shuddered with inconvenient desire.

Who was his reliable source? Eriel? Willen? One of the ladies?

I knew he would probably feel my heart beating fast, and the way I leaned into his petting – helpless. My body was doing one thing whilst my brain was doing another. “Why are you doing this to me?” I asked, eventually.

I’m not sure if it was an answer to my hopeless question, but he replied, “I saw her. The *real* Catania.”

My body started to burn with nerves at his confession, and I realised now how serious this was. If he was relying on someone to confirm it for him, I could probably talk my way out of it. My word against theirs.

Yet, his words changed everything. *He knew I was lying.*

I took too long to decide what to say because Jesper became impatient and desperate to know what I thought. He delighted in having me squirm at his words, and I knew he wanted to see my panic – to realise that I had lost control.

“Don’t feel too bad, Kitty Cat. It was a long time ago, and you wouldn’t have remembered me either. This wasn’t as noticeable for starters.” He tapped the cheek where his tattoo was. *So, the mutation changed as he grew older.*

Swallowing nervously, I managed to speak again and tried to keep my voice level. “You met me as well?”

He smirked at this, pleased I'd acknowledged his comments had some truth in them. "I visited the castle as a boy. There was some trade agreement that my father was attending. I was sneaking around the castle when I spotted *Catania* sneaking out of your room. You poked your little head out—" he hesitated.

"That's enough," I whispered, already knowing what he had remembered. "No one could tell the difference between us. How do you know you were not mistaken?"

"You called after her. I heard her name leave your lips. And while everyone else may not be able to tell you apart, I could. You were smaller than her, frail at the time, but you were sad to see her go. From what I can recall, you were frightened – it sounded as though the two of you had argued badly."

Another person had seen us. My parents would have been horrified to know. They had tried to keep us both under lock and key for so long.

I disregarded his comments about the argument – not wanting to relive it.

"My parents didn't care for me at the time, not whilst... she was alive," I muttered, finding I wanted to explain myself, to make him understand what he saw that day. "She was so ill, and the two of us only really had one another as friends. This was before Eriel and I met."

I saw Jesper's eyebrows furrow as he tried to work out who Eriel was.

"The soldier or the hand?" he asked. *I really did have to introduce the two of them properly.*

"Willen is my general. Eriel is my chief advisor."

They hadn't betrayed me to him then, at least. If they had, he would know their names.

"Well, you can see why I keep getting confused."

I ignored him. "Our parents made sure that the servants around us were limited. People might have thought I was the one who was in poor health if they *had* seen us together."

There was a flicker of something, an emotion I couldn't name, that made his eyes darken. And then it was gone. "As much as I feel sorry for you, this information doesn't change anything, you know. If I wanted to, I could raise this with your Small Council and have you overthrown, Queenie." It was like he was teasing me at first. His lips formed a knowing smile.

I frowned. “No, I was still in line to the throne after Catania, anyway.”

His fingers brushed my jaw as he held my chin. “But are you? Have you ever thought about why your parents mistreated you?”

“I don’t know what you’re trying to insinuate,” I whispered, bewildered.

I could see his hesitation again, wondering if he should reveal what he knew. “Your parents, they never told you? Never let on?”

“Never let on *what*, Ulara?” I snapped.

But I already knew the answer – somewhere deep inside of me, I did. Something that I’d often thought about late at night when I was left in my dingy childhood room.

“That you were not their real daughter, not by blood. That is why you don’t have a claim on the throne and why those pompous men are sniffing about – they know something is wrong.”

I registered just how stupid I had been.

I’d slowly been revealing myself to Jesper, letting him into private parts of my life, all because he told me a few things about himself. *I knew I shouldn’t have trusted him, and I wished I’d stuck by that.*

Shoving his chest to get him off me, I let out an angry cry when he cupped his hand around the back of my neck. Water splashed around us, my body was pressed firmly against his, the water from my body seeping into his clothes. I gripped hold of his shoulders tightly to steady myself and dug my nails into his skin to make him wince.

I should have shoved him again, but I was captivated by the danger that this man presented. He was so close that I could feel his cool breath on my face and, despite my anger, I was ready to throw myself at him. Maybe it was my anger that was fuelling such thoughts.

It was as if he could read my feelings as one of his large hands trailed down between us, cupping my folds in his hot hand.

I gasped at the touch, my fingers curling in the material of his shirt. I was a mess. I needed to get a hold of myself. “*You disgust me.*”

“That’s not what your body is telling me, Kitty Cat. You want me just as much as I want you.” His voice was heavy, devoid of his usual humour. Whilst the words were teasing, the finger that brushed over my folds made me press closer to him, wanting to feel all of him. The heel of his hand pressed down, and a tingling sensation shot through my body.

I wanted to continue. To feel what his talented fingers would do to me and to place my lips over every inch of skin he would let me touch – every

part he would let me memorise. I sighed longingly, and my forehead rested against his chin.

His hot breath fanned over the top of my head as he waited for my decision. His finger continued to torment me, ghosting over my entrance.

Just one little movement and I could have what my heart desired...

At that moment, my brain made the sudden decision, and I pushed myself to my feet. Releasing him made him drop his hands. I stood, fully bared to the man that I wanted to take into my embrace – but knew I never could.

Not after his revelation.

I'd already given him too much of my trust, and he would use that against me. It was hard not to blush, as I stared down at the man who was unashamedly running his eyes all over my body. His lips parted with a soft breath and his eyes gave every part of my body the same undivided attention.

“Just try and tell your story, Ulara.” My hands clenched into fists at my sides. “And see what I do to those that deceive me. I have let you get away with too much, I will not make the same mistake again.”

Climbing from the bath, I snatched the linen that rested over a chair and wrapped it around my body, legs trembling with need. I wouldn't admit that it wasn't from the cold. His low chuckle echoed as I padded towards the door that led into my bed chamber.

“Maybe I will, Kitty Cat. Or perhaps I will be your *most* loyal subject.”

Chapter Eighteen



I'd squirmed around in bed, unfulfilled and hot all over due to Jesper's unholy touches. Unable to sleep, even after some private time, I went to the old chapel to paint – in the hopes that it would help me to calm down. I needed to clear my head enough to deal with all the issues that were swirling around.

I was draped in a worn white blanket, one that I'd clung to as a child, though I still shivered in my cream silk nightgown in the cold chapel. I mixed my colours by candlelight, adding to the painting of the mysterious woman, as I let my thoughts sort themselves out.

Lord Josephite. His secret had been put in the open for all to hear and that would make him run to my enemy's open arms.

Then there were Lord Olliea and Sir Siwel. Olliea was easier to keep an eye on, and I wondered if he would try to worm his way out of doing what I wanted him to. Sir Siwel was another case entirely, and his connection to Jesper was still concerning.

Had I underestimated the plan? The two of them could be working together – Jesper might have lied to me about his mother.

Jesper was so complicated.

More complicated than I'd first realised. His insinuation that I was not related to my family had left a bitter taste in my mouth. To hear someone else speaking about it only made me more certain of what I'd already

suspected. He probably wasn't lying – but *who* would have confirmed this for him, and what did they know about my past?

I held the blanket closer to me, one hand bunched in the front while the other gripped the paint brush. After some time, I decided to work on something knew.

Retrieving a new canvas, I began to sketch out an initial guide. When I paused, bringing the candle closer to see what I'd done, I realised I'd drawn Jesper. He was smiling back at me, his hair falling in front of his face, his hand buried in Arka's fur.

Something was seriously wrong with me.

It was silent in the chapel, but I knew I wasn't alone.

The hairs on the back of my neck stood up as I could feel eyes on me. I wondered if it was Jesper again, coming to apologise for his behaviour earlier or to break the news to me that he had decided to switch sides and that the engagement was off.

However, the stare felt different. The person was not getting nearer, instead, they hovered at the door behind me.

"Can I help you?" I got out bluntly.

"No, Your Majesty. I am just admiring you at work." The voice was much lighter than I had expected, yet it still resonated around the chapel. I couldn't tell who was speaking, and I did not recognise their voice.

Turning my head slightly, I took in their figure. But, there was not much to see as they were dressed in a large brown cloak that covered their body and their face. I could see that they were reasonably short, but that was all. Quiet settled between us.

It must be the figure who I'd seen talking to Riddel. I cleared my throat. "Who are you?"

"A friend, Your Majesty. I was sent to make sure you were alright by His... Lordship." They seemed uncertain of their words.

Was this figure the spy Josephite referred to at the joust? They could be the person that was speaking in the room the night Eden had died.

"Jesperin? What does he care?" I huffed, annoyed at the mention of the man. I turned back to the canvas and angrily picked up a paintbrush to swipe some paint onto the sketch. It was messy because of my fury, so I tried to fix the rough strokes with softer ones.

The figure let out a soft chuckle, the sound a little wheezy. "Lord Ulara cares for you a great deal, Your Majesty, don't be fooled by his actions. I

do not know what he did to offend you, but he would not put you in danger. He made you the oath, didn't he?"

The oath. I groaned at the reminder, setting my brush down and spinning around on the stool to face the figure. The room was only lit by the candles beside me, and it made the shadowy figure in the doorway appear larger than they were.

I'd forgotten about the oath and noticed my body begin to unwind. I knew the oath was legitimate, and my doubts began to ease. Jesper couldn't betray me even if he wanted to, not without repercussions for himself.

"You are a close confidant of his?" I asked instead, not answering their question.

"He tells me everything. Well, everything I need to know to help him."

"Did he tell you about his suspicions to do with my birth?" I questioned, the words almost a whisper, worried someone else might overhear – even though no one would be around this late in the evening. All of them had been drinking and celebrating.

The figure nodded quickly. "He did. I was the one who confirmed them."

Definitely a spy.

"Who are you to know about my family?" There was a familiarity that I couldn't explain. The person filled me with an ease that only Eriel had ever managed to conjure before. And yet, I didn't know them even half as well.

"Someone who does their research, is all. You can trust that what I find out is the truth," they answered tactfully.

"Then will you tell me what you know?"

"You are the queen, of course I will tell you. It is not as though I can say no," they replied and moved to straighten up.

"It is so refreshing to be around someone who knows the meaning of respecting their monarch," I commented – which made the figure let out a throaty laugh.

"You may not like what I have to say, Your Majesty."

I tilted my head, fidgeting on the stool, feeling as though I wanted to leap up and pull the hood from their face to see who it was. But my fingers gripped the edge of the stool as an alternative, ankles crossing as I leaned

forward. “Nevertheless, I ask you to tell me as a woman who wants to know about her past.”

“Very well.” They nodded before continuing, “I was there the day you were brought to Henvale Castle.”

So, it was true, I had not been born into the royal family.

I felt my heart sink to my stomach, and an ache filled my heart. It was all beginning to make sense – the treatment I received from those who should have loved me.

I listened closely as the person continued to speak, “You were four. The Crown Prince and Princess at the time, the late king and queen, had found out that their daughter was unwell and had a weak heart. So, they sent their servants throughout the kingdom to look for a child that was similar to the little princess. You just so happened to fit that description, and your mother gave you up. Didn’t want anything to do with you after she saw the sum of money that they were offering to pay.” I was surprised by how simple the story was and how every little bit of emotion had been drained from the person’s voice.

I clasped my hands together in my lap, still wriggling on the stool as I felt my throat constrict. Hot tears threatened to spill over my cheeks. Crying around others was something I hated – all the sensations that came with it only made me feel weak.

And yet, the words rang true. I knew that there was no point in trying to dispute them. “What is Jesper going to do with this information?”

“He wanted you to know. Granted, he probably did not tell you in the best way, which is why I have come to clear it up for you. If that is all you need from me, I’ll be on my way.” The hooded figure bowed their head and moved to disappear into the dark corridor. I opened my mouth to speak, but no words left, and instead, I realised I had started to cry.

A sob left my lips, and I buried my head in my hands as I let out the emotions I’d kept in for some time.

The information only put me more on edge. I had to worry about if anyone else knew this information. Maybe the lords did. I would have to find Eriel and tell him what had happened. The two of us would have so much to look into.

Everything I’d known was confirmed to be a lie. I wanted it to be simple, to be able to trust those around me rather than hide behind a wall.

The tears rolled down my cheeks as I raised my head to look at the painting. Moving swiftly, I knocked the canvas off the easel, letting out a scream. The sound resounded off the surfaces of the small chapel, and I knocked off my paints from the table, my hands covered in wet paint. The blanket fell from my shoulders as I continued to destroy the items I held dear.

Against my better judgement, I stormed towards the dungeons.

I needed to see them. They had no hold on me anymore.

The guards gave me a peculiar look as I paid them little attention and gave no explanation for my attire or for why I was there.

A benefit of being queen was that they could not ask me why.

I took the steps two at a time as I rushed down the dark spiral staircase and into the depths of the castle dungeons. The noise below was loud, and I realised that the prisoners would hardly know when night and day occurred – apart from when their wardens would feed them.

I did not pass their cells. Instead, I walked towards the left of the staircase, where there was a second set of steps.

It was darker and uneven as I walked down, nearly tripping on the upturned stones.

As I reached the bottom, I spotted what I was looking for. I did not even realise my cheeks were growing wet with more tears as I stalked towards the light at the end of the corridor.

“Your Majesty.” My parents’ physician looked up from his book, where he sat outside one of the oldest cells in the castle. “What are you doing here?”

“Out of my way,” I demanded. “Open the door. I need to speak to them.”

“They are not ready for visitors, Your Majesty...” the physician spoke the words carefully, but I would not listen.

“That was a command.”

After wavering again, the physician moved to the cell door and sought the key from the ring on his belt. I watched him unlock the door, and he pushed it open.

The door screeched in protest, and I entered the cell.

It was much brighter than I would have expected inside. I squinted to allow my eyes to become accustomed to the glow that was created by numerous torches.

At a modest round table sat two figures. They were both hunched over and did not seem to be moving much aside from the rise and fall of their unsteady breathing.

“They have been asleep most of the day, Your Majesty. I have managed to keep them subdued for these past few weeks, and they are becoming accustomed to the herbs I give them—”

“Are they in pain?” I got out, watching the woman’s shoulders shake as she let out a hacking cough. “Give me the truth.”

The physician sighed as he shuffled to stand at my side, his head only just reaching my shoulders. “Yes, I’m afraid they probably are. The venom in that... that creature’s bite must be very powerful.”

“Do they recognise you yet?”

“No.” The physician shook his head, the wisps of his short grey hair only just in my eye-line. “They still have yet to identify me. It is as though they have a disease of the mind, Your Majesty. They have problems remembering most things.”

“What do they say, if anything?”

I could tell he did not want to answer me. His reluctance was evident in the way he shifted uncomfortably. “They only ask for the goddesses to take them to their Catania.”

I swallowed thickly as more tears threatened to spill over my cheeks. I shifted on my feet before turning to go without another word.

I returned to the destroyed chapel, and that was where Eriel found me the next morning, curled up in the mess of items, with tear-stained cheeks, and fast asleep.

Chapter Nineteen



“Your Majesty.”

My eyes opened when a heavy hand rested on my shoulder, and I looked up to see Kalline standing there, with Posy just behind her.

“What is it, ladies?” I asked, tired. My sleep on the cold chapel floor had been fitful, and it left me exhausted after filling Eriel in on all the problems the two of us would have to fix. He had been just as shocked as I at the news of my adoption and had rushed to try and work out who the figure in the chapel was – *and how they knew the information*.

Posy was the one who spoke next, her bright red hair chopped short, and she was still wearing the crown she had been given the day of the joust. The flowers were starting to wilt, but the smile on the woman’s round face was enough to make them look cheerful. Her dress, which had probably been made by Kalline, was a fern green with a darker shade of stripes and lots of frills.

Kalline took after her sister in her outfit, a set of deep red leather trousers and a black overcoat and shirt. Jesper’s entourage was usually dressed in such colours, as the women walked around in the men’s style, which I admired.

“I came to ask if you wanted me to finish your fitting for the feast, Your Majesty?” Kalline smiled, the light from the window casting over her face

and making her skin glow. The golden marks on her face sparkled too, as though they might start moving at any moment.

Her bright eyes were painted with a shimmering gold shadow to match, and her hair had been pulled back behind her head with a large claw-shaped clip. She looked incredibly lovely at that moment, I thought. Kalline was someone who was easy to like, and Posy was just the same.

Nodding in response, I pushed myself out of the plush chair and moved to stand where Kalline was gesturing to.

She had a basket on her arm filled with materials and pins, and I was secretly grateful that it was her that was designing my outfit. There had been so many people vying to be placed as the Queen's dressmaker, and I'd never managed to get around to appointing anyone. Kalline's talent was proving useful to me – even if she had originally been a spy to Jesper.

The fabric she draped across my form was pale sea green silk, and I stared at the swirls of gilded embroidery. I held my arms out for her as she continued to add to the rough form she had already taken, and Posy began to chat away enthusiastically.

"Everyone is excited about your birthday feast, Your Majesty." Posy grinned, flopping down onto the chaise, and kicking her skirts as she did so. My mind drifted to the memories of Jesper flinging himself onto the settee, making himself quite at home, and I quickly tried to erase them.

I had to stop thinking about him.

"Oh?" I asked. "And what are you all excited about?"

To me, it was just a meal. *Just another day. It wasn't even my real birthday, it was Catania's.*

I grunted when a pin pricked my skin and glanced up at Kalline who wore a smirk on her face, winking when she felt my gaze. "Apologies." *Maybe she knew about my birth, too? After all, she did work for Jesper.*

"Well, it's somewhere for us to meet husbands, isn't it?" Posy babbled away, waving her arms about as her cheeks went rosy.

Clearing my throat as I looked away from Kalline and back to Posy. I raised a questioning eyebrow. "A husband? But you are still so young, Posy. Do you not have other things you would like to be doing?"

This seemed to catch the woman off guard, and she scrunched her small button nose up as she thought about it. "What else is there to do other than get married?"

I let out a sigh, not surprised by the words but disappointed by them. Smiling subtly as I noticed Kalline's face screw up at the answer too.

After a moment, I answered the woman no older than twenty, "There's so much more to life than just finding yourself a husband, Posy. Pursuing a profession, a hobby, making friends, and travelling." All things I wished I could do myself. *Instead, I was trapped in this role forever.* "Just look at Kalline and her skills in making clothes. You are able to travel around with Lord Ulara, are you not, Kalline?"

The woman beamed, looking over her shoulder to Posy, her neck craned. "Indeed, Your Majesty." She then pointed at Posy. "I could put in a good word for you if you like, Posy, dear?" The words were inviting, and I watched as Posy's cheeks grow red under the woman's gaze.

Now, *this* was entertaining. "And it does not have to be a husband that tickles your fancy," I added, just for good measure.

"Oh!" Posy flushed, but she smiled coyly. "Just like you and Mirana at the masque ball?"

I thought back to the memory of flirting with Mirana and nodded firmly. "Exactly like that. Although there were other intentions for that dance."

Sometimes I forgot how sheltered some of their lives were. They only knew what their parents wanted them to know.

I glanced down as I felt two hot hands pressing against the silk on my stomach, my eyes widening in alarm as I realised what was going on. Kalline was changing the colour of the silk with her fingers, the green turning into a stunning periwinkle blue. Her eyes glowed sapphire as she used her fingers to flatten the material before looking up at me.

"What did you... how?" I asked and looked between the women, but Posy was not alarmed.

"Oh, Kalline is able to make the material change with her magic – isn't it amazing?" Posy grinned.

So, she could understand something that was meant to be a myth, but couldn't comprehend same-sex relationships? The world was certainly a strange one.

"Magic?" I asked, astounded. I couldn't grasp the idea, even though I'd seen it happening before my very eyes.

Kalline smiled, her sharp teeth revealed. "It is a gift from my mutation – it unlocked the magic within me."

"Unlocked the... magic within you," I repeated dumbly.

Kalline was patient with me as she continued to make alterations to the dress, some with mundane skills, others with her magical touch. “As you know, demons come from old magic. Our gifts died out a long time ago – but it is said that the mutation is bringing magic out in certain demons. The venom is reacting with our blood. My gift allows me the ability to work with materials.”

“What does that include?”

She scratched her chin as she paused. “Well, I am most practised with fabrics since I enjoy making clothes – but I could work with metal and make weapons if I wanted. Or perhaps even build homes if I had the time to learn. Even though I have the magic, it does not mean I know how to use it.” Kalline shrugged and cut off a loose thread with some scissors.

“That’s certainly a lot to take in,” I murmured.

“You don’t need to worry much, Majesty. I am the only one in Jesper’s party that has any gift – magic is still not quite an explained skill yet.”

“I see...” I answered, wondering how many other demons existed with magic. I would have to ask Jesper at some point – but it did appear as though the mutators did not know they could unlock such magic within people. Otherwise, surely Kalline would have been kept at the facility to be monitored? “Is it to be kept a secret?”

“I have only told those I believe trustworthy to avoid it being revealed.”

She believed I was trustworthy?

“What about the other ladies? You made their dresses,” I said, holding my chin up when Kalline moved to place her hands on the material on my shoulders to create some puffed sleeves that tied at my elbow with a white ribbon.

Kalline shook her head. “Just Posy. I do not trust the others – especially not Lady Mirana and her sister.”

I was surprised by this confession but had no time to ask her about it as Mirana and Darlia entered, close to one another. Mirana whispered to the other woman, her eyes shifting between me and her sister.

“Nice of you to join us, ladies,” I called to them where they were hovering in the doorway, Mirana immediately standing straight.

“We came to inform you that you have a guest, Your Majesty,” Darlia was the one who spoke, her voice stern and much louder than the soft-spoken Mirana. Darlia was a snappy woman; I’d noticed that during our time together.

I glanced to Kalline who looked just as baffled as I felt. “Were you expecting someone?” she asked.

Shaking my head, Darlia continued in her dignified way, “It’s Lord Halle, Majesty.”

Narim Halle. The handsome lord of one of the northern territories of the kingdom. He’d only recently become the lord when his father died, and since it was at least three days’ travel on horseback, he had been unable to attend when I invited him to the masquerade.

However, he had competed in the joust – but we did not have much time to converse with one another off the field.

Growing up, Catania mentioned meeting him when they were young. She acted as though she could remember him, but it must have been just before she’d become incredibly ill. She would tell me about how attractive he was, exaggerating the facts every time. She tended to do that.

Sometimes, I missed her excitement as she told a story. We made unconventional friends but relied on one another – *most of the time*.

My shoulders fell as I thought of her, eyes to the floor. I’d tried to push her out of my head. I wanted to erase all that had happened with her.

By living the life she should have had?

It was an intrusive thought that left me agitated.

“Ask for him to be sent up,” I announced. It might be unconventional to have the man come in when I was dressing, but I’d found him quite charming at the joust.

This is what I told Kalline and Posy when the two sisters huffed and left.

“They must not enjoy being ordered around,” Posy commented sympathetically.

“We think you made the right decision, Cat. Even if they don’t,” Kalline answered, the name slipping from her lips with ease, and I found I didn’t mind her calling me it. I’d given them permission to drop the formalities, although that only applied to the two women in front of me.

“Yes, you don’t need to worry about them. Mirana is still upset over what happened at the joust.” Posy flushed, and I gave her a soft smile.

“What happened that day wasn’t your fault, Posy,” I told her, not wanting the woman to feel guilty for the way I had embarrassed the other woman. “I hope she hasn’t been giving you a hard time?”

Posy shook her head with a grin. “I would never let her get to me. I enjoyed the celebrations that day, and a few nasty comments from the

daughter of a traitor won't upset me."

Kalline snorted when my jaw dropped at the redhead's words. I was astonished that she was so honest about the rumours that surrounded the Josephite family.

"You'll catch flies." Kalline laughed, tapping my chin with her fingers so I would close my mouth again.

Blushing, I turned back to Posy, who was chatting away once more with a smile. "Everyone knows about the Josephite family. They are from a long line of traitors to the crown. In fact, it's surprising they still have a standing in society."

"But the Olliea family supports them," Kalline added, a couple of pins hanging out of her mouth.

"How do you know all of this?" I asked.

The woman let out a throaty chuckle and finishing pinning the puff sleeve. "Jesperin. He did his research before arriving – he met someone who is very familiar with the history of the royal family."

It must be the figure I met the evening before.

They knew a lot of my past and I was sure that extended to long before I was brought into the castle. The figure had been on my mind all night as I tried to work out who they could possibly be.

Kalline finished her draping and gave me no chance to look at it as she pulled it over my head in one swoop, nearly knocking me over in the process. "Sorry, Cat. Can't let you see it properly until the feast."

I stared at her, astounded. "Were you trying to knock me into the fire?"

Kalline smirked. "You're hot enough, My Lady."

"You're just like your sister," I muttered in amusement, enjoying the light flirting. I pulled on my shirt once more and the long black velvet overcoat that Kalline had gifted me a few days prior – which must have also been made with her gift. "Are all of your family like this?"

"Oh, our baby brother is quite the opposite. Though you are unlikely to meet him – since he lives in Dalvesta." Kalline chuckled to herself, packing away her things.

"May I ask you something, Cat?" Posy asked, patting the spot beside her on the chaise. I moved to sit down, raising an eyebrow as her invitation to continue. "Do not take offence, but I have a talent for reading people, and I wondered why you always shut yourself off when you are around us?"

It was so sudden. And to have someone question me in such a striking way had me speechless for some time. The women were good-natured. They deserved an answer.

“I am not used to having female friends,” I admitted, thinking of Eriel and Willen. “Or many friends at all.”

Posy grinned and squeezed my hand with her soft one. “You have us now.”

“Speaking of friends...” Kalline smirked, and she draped the dress form over her arm as she stayed standing up. “Is Sir Swan off the market?”

I spluttered a little, “Willen Swan?”

Kalline nodded enthusiastically, her pearl earrings swinging about. “The very same.”

Clearing his throat, Willen blushed as he stood in the doorway of the room, looking sheepish at having heard the conversation. “I am sorry to interrupt, Your Majesty.”

“Not at all. Perhaps you would answer Kalline’s question yourself?” I teased and found that the reassurance from the women had let my mind relax for a moment. They were trying their hardest, and perhaps I had to stop making it so difficult for them.

“Maybe later, Majesty.” Willen was polite, bowing his head, unable to meet my gaze.

About to make him answer the question, I stood up when someone else entered the room, and a pleasant smile settled on my face.

Narim stood proudly with a gleaming smile. He was larger than I had imagined, rounded with years of eating well in the north, and smaller in stature than he had come across as at the joust, but it did not stop him from being handsome. His dark hair was slicked back on his head, and his eyes were a deep brown that complimented his olive skin.

He stepped closer and took my hand in his. I bit the inside of my cheek as he pressed a kiss to the back of it. “Lord Halle, what a pleasure. I hope you can forgive my impudence by not meeting you after the joust.”

“There is nothing to forgive, Your Majesty. I am honoured that you have given me a private audience... and a chance to meet some of your charming ladies before the feast.” His voice was gruff but not unpleasant. I quickly introduced him to Posy and Kalline before sending the women from the room, noticing the longing look Kalline threw in Willen’s direction. Yet, the man was not looking at her.

Willen continued to watch my interaction with Lord Halle until I bowed my head to dismiss him. I wondered if he wanted me to ask him to stay and keep watch, but I didn't need to – Lord Halle would be easy to take down if I had to. *Though I highly doubted I would need to do such a thing.*

It had always amazed me that Narim had never noticed the difference between Catania and Cat. I thought the differences had always been obvious. She was a child when he met her, as was he, so I'd put it down to that. But, as well as our physical appearance, our personalities were very different.

Catania tried her hardest to be bubbly, gentle, and kind to those she ever got to meet. I'd imagined I was the only one to witness her merciless side.

But maybe we were more similar than I thought. And that made an anger fester deep inside of me.

Once Willen had moved to the door, Narim's smile dropped, and the young man looked solemn. He joined me on the chaise, leaning forward on his knees. "I came as soon as I got the letter from Lord Swan, Your Majesty. I know others may think I am here under the guise of winning your heart or the joust, but I am here to lend you my assistance with the mutation problem."

Little bells rang in my mind as I realised what the man was talking about. Eriel had informed me briefly about sending a letter to someone who could be of use to us. I just had not imagined it would be Lord Halle.

"How can you help?" I asked, blunt.

His eyes flittered about the room, and he seemed nervous. "Lord Swan asked me to note down what I had seen in the north."

"And?" I asked, growing impatient.

He was trying to build suspense, and it was growing tiresome.

He sniffed, off-put by my honesty. The man was just trying to be helpful, but I could not help but show my desperation to know what he had found. "Lord Swan asked me to investigate Sir Siwel's family holdings. He originally came from the north, and I found some very interesting information for you. His dead brother's house is only half a day's ride from my home, and so I decided to see what I could find for you there."

I assumed Eriel had promised the man riches for his help; he seemed excitable as he went on to reveal what he'd found. "Well, you'll never believe it, but it seems that is where the mutations are taking place. At least one of the operations."

“Did you see anything else?”

Narim nodded, his hair not moving due to the amount of oil that he had run through it. I noticed it seemed to be a fashion statement among the younger members of the court and figured that Narim was trying to make himself fit in. The hooped earrings in his ears shifted as he spiritedly began to speak again. “There were three men there who appeared to be in charge. I recognised two of them.”

“Spit it out then. I am growing tired of waiting, Lord Halle,” I said, my nails digging into the material of the chaise as I gripped the edge of it.

He sighed, shoulders dropping. “Lord Olliea and Sir Siwel.”

“And what did the third man look like?”

“Well, I can’t be sure. They wore a hood.” Narim was apologetic.

I tried to keep my face emotionless, but I was beginning to grow restless. I needed to do something; but I required a proper plan for what I wanted to do next. As for the news of there being a third person involved in the mutations...

Could it be the hooded figure who visited me in the chapel? Was this person a double agent? Was I thinking too much into the disguise of Jesper’s spy? Plenty of people owned hooded cloaks after all.

But they were plaguing my thoughts. Being close to Jesper would make them privy to all of what Jesper had discovered about the operations, and I quickly decided I would warn him.

Even if he was suspicious himself. If there was one thing I could trust about the unpredictable ex-pirate, it was his hatred of those who were mutating his fellow demons. Of those that harmed his father and left him with his ink mark.

“I am sorry for not being able to be more help, Your Majesty.” Narim sighed, looking down.

I shook my head swiftly at the young man’s genuine sadness – which was unenjoyable to watch. He was a few years younger than me, but in that moment I could really see the difference in our ages. “You need not apologise. The rest of your information is very useful, and I am grateful.” I meant my words too.

When he smiled, I noticed his cheeks turned rosy. “I am glad I could be of help to you. If you ever need my assistance again, I would be delighted to be at your disposal. And I should mention that I am sorry I could not

attend your masque a month ago. I would have loved to dance with such a beautiful woman.”

“You flatter me, Lord Halle.”

“Not at all. It is the truth. I’d heard stories of your beauty throughout the kingdom, though I could not remember it when we were children. You surpass all the rumours.” I was surprised at the firmness in his tone and the way he reached out and took my hand in his. He squeezed, and I felt the sincerity of the action. I even managed a small smile for the man.

“Well, thank you. I hope you will be satisfied with sitting at my side for the feast?” I would placate him, after all, he had helped me greatly with finding more proof of the nefarious actions going on in my kingdom.

Narim nodded eagerly. “I am honoured, Your Majesty.”

Feeling my lips relax into the smile, I let out a quiet laugh. “No, really, the honour is mine.”

“You are kindness itself, Majesty.” Narim pressed a wet kiss to the back of my hand. “And I shall look forward to this evening.”

“Come, we should all leave and let the queen ready herself, as it is late in the afternoon.” Posy poked her head around the door and offered a beautiful smile to Narim, who was reluctant to release my hand. Eventually, he bowed with an awkward flourish before leaving.

I winked when Posy looked back at me from the doorway, her grin lifting my mood considerably. Once they were gone, I turned to walk through the adjoining door into my bed chambers.

There was a clang as a crown fell to the floor beside my vanity and the scraping of chair legs as someone flew up and out of it.

The scent of my favourite lavender perfume was strong as I opened the door, my eyes widening when I realised the room was not empty.

“Mirana... what on earth do you think you are doing in here?” I asked, my voice deadly calm.

When had she slipped back in? She was too stunned to move, her hand wrapped around some of my private communications. She had an emerald choker wrapped around her neck that was incredibly familiar – *since I’d often seen Catania wearing it.*

“I...”

“Oh, Mirana, do you think I would be stupid enough to leave anything of importance in here?” I asked coolly, stepping towards her until she backed herself up against the vanity. I stopped when my toes were

brushing her peach-coloured skirts. “Has your father put you up to this? It will be such a shame for you to have to return empty-handed.”

“Please, Majesty, do not hurt me,” she whimpered, grey eyes wide and her light lashes fluttering. I watched her chest rise and fall and let her fall into a state of panic.

I tutted, brushing my fingers over her powdered cheek. “I’m not going to hurt you, sweet one. You’re already hurting yourself – being your father’s lackey. But when he realises you can’t even do something as simple as spying on the queen... well, what will he do to you then?”

The fear that crossed her face left me satisfied. I lowered my hand and yanked on the choker until it broke into my hand so I could throw it on the floor beside her. It left an ugly red mark on her pale skin, and she started to tremble. I watched her for a moment before I stepped to one side. “Now get out, you silly girl. Before I change my mind.”

She darted from the room, nearly tripping on her dress, her hair toppling to one side with how high she had styled it.

I would have to keep a close eye on her – and her father. Crouching down to pick up the crown she had dropped, I sighed as my fingers wrapped around the broken choker, remembering the last time it had been worn.

“What do you think, Cate? Mama gave it to me.” Catania had her hand on the choker as she twirled around in her matching dark green gown.

I grinned as I lay on my stomach on her plush bed, giving her a thumbs up. “You look beautiful.”

Catania moved towards me, and she cupped my face in her soft hands. “I’m so excited about my first ball! It’s a shame that Papa and Mama said you couldn’t come. I wish they would give you nice things, too.”

I glanced down at the old brown button-up dress I wore, the one that was too small and had been patched up one too many times with scraps the maids could find. “It doesn’t matter, Catania.”

She frowned, pressing her forehead against mine gently. “One day, you’ll be treated just like I am.”

I’m not sure she knew then if that was true – but in some twisted way, her words had become accurate. I was living a life that was meant for her.

But she hadn’t gone to her first ball that night. We were so young – we didn’t understand that they were trying to placate her. *That she was not being treated well either.*

Chapter Twenty



Eriel tapped his foot on the floor as he stood with his arms folded, impatient as I flattened out the material of my dress. I felt confident in the garment, realising Kalline had worked wonders on it in just a day.

The dress had beautiful, puffed sleeves and a square neckline that left the space just above my chest bare aside from some small sheer frills. The waist was accentuated and the whole dress was covered in a sheer pink lavender coloured material that flowed, sparkling over the first periwinkle layer.

“You know you’re late. Again.” Eriel snorted, poking his head round mine in the mirror, hoping to get my attention. The man had no problem in hurrying me along, even if I was the queen.

“Well, I’m never going to get better at time management. It’s too late for someone of my age,” I joked. “How about we make ourselves a little later and have a talk about what we’re going to do about Olliea and Sir Siwel?” I grabbed a golden bracelet to tie around my wrist, my eyes flickering between his reflection and my own.

“Willen is going to take some men to the location Lord Halle gave to confirm his story. He’ll leave at the end of the festivities this evening.” Eriel sighed heavily, brushing a hand over his hair that was pulled back into a half-up, half-down style. A few stray curls had made their way loose and were tickling his cheeks.

“And then? Are you following the rest of my plan?”

“Not like I had much of a say, is it? You’re the queen, and I am merely your humble servant,” he replied dramatically.

There it was. *How could I even think Eriel might betray me? He had done nothing to deserve my hesitancy about him.*

“Humble?” I snorted. “Definitely not the word I would use to describe you.”

“How disrespectful.” The curly-haired male chuckled and stepped forward to take over when I started to huff, unable to tie the bracelet with one hand. His fingers worked expertly to fix it. “*But* completely justified,” he continued as he focused on my bracelet, “the rest of the plan will go underway when we have confirmed what is going on in the north.”

“I wish I could go myself,” I admitted, disappointed.

Eriel placed his hand on my shoulder. “You know Willen will have it under control, and your safety is more important. We don’t know what those men are capable of, and if you were harmed, I would not forgive myself.”

I met his gaze finally. There was nothing but honesty there. “I can’t just sit here and pretend nothing is happening, Eriel. I know that once I break the news to Jesper, he will want to go himself, and then I am left here to wonder what they’ll find.”

I knew there was no stopping Jesper.

“But you will be safe at least, Cat.” He was determined. “We still don’t know what would happen to the kingdom if you died—”

“It would go to a cousin of the crown, most likely.” I sighed, shaking my head. “One of the Dalvestans.”

The Dalvestan royal family were the only distant cousins of the royal family in Crimone. I’d never been any good at studying the family tree when I was young, but King Firo had always highlighted the family link there.

“Still, Cat,” Eriel was exasperated. “We fought so hard to get you here. I won’t let you give it all up over this.”

“I don’t want the crown, you know I never did,” I whispered, stubbornly.

“That’s not an option, and you know it,” Eriel answered, his mouth twisting as if he had tasted something unpleasant. “Your parents are rotting away in a cell and would be more than happy to come back if we let them.”

The memories of the night when my life had changed for a second time began to consume my thoughts, and I tried to shake them away, unable to think of them without my stomach churning.

“I told you not to bring that up to me again, *ever*,” I snapped, my throat beginning to burn as I fought back the tears that always threatened to spill over at the very thought of that night. “They are down there for a good reason, but you’re making me out to be a villain – as though I am punishing them–”

“No, you’re just punishing yourself instead. You have to learn to like your role, Cat, because it’s not about to change.” Eriel waved his arms in his frustration, taking a step away from me.

Clearly, he was not going to change his mind about the subject and I let out a heavy sigh, trying not to show how my hands were trembling. “Alright, Eriel. I’ll be down in a moment,” I told him, done with the conversation. *I felt trapped all over again – the crown was a curse rather than a blessing.*

“I know you’re upset with me, but I’m just looking out for you as your friend. You can hate my words all you want, but you know there’s truth in them,” Eriel’s words were careful, but I could tell he was hurting too. I looked down at the vanity table, vision blurry as I thought over what he’d said.

He was not trying to be unkind to me, and I owed him an apology. When I turned to do so, he had vanished.

In his place stood Jesper.

“Something the matter, Kitty Cat? You look shaken,” Jesper said with interest, examining my face. He wandered into the room; his arms folded across his chest as he walked to the centre. He exuded a natural confidence, and I was envious of him.

I was breathless for a moment. Jesper looked handsome, his hair half tied back with a white ribbon and eyes lined with black again. His smooth skin glowed, and he was dressed in blue to match my dress. Kalline had done so without consulting me, but I found I could not be angry at the woman. Even though the colour clashed with his hair, he still managed to pull it off.

His overcoat was left open, revealing his black patterned corset, his usual black shirt and pants beneath it.

“Just a little misunderstanding is all,” I muttered, turning back to the mirror quickly.

“Didn’t sound much like a misunderstanding to me,” he commented persistently.

“Why ask if you already know?” I said, staring at his reflection as he grabbed at different things on the vanity table. He picked up a light blue lace choker, handing it to me.

“Put this on.” Jesper nudged the item closer when I did not take it immediately.

Begrudgingly, I took the choker and began to clasp it around my neck, not in the mood to argue with him on the subject. “What are you doing in here anyway, Ulara?”

“I came to see why my lovely fiancée was hiding away from her guests. Have to say, I don’t blame you, they’re all such a bore.” Jesper grimaced as he accidentally sprayed some perfume in his face with the bottle he was playing with.

The sight made me smile. My tears retreated, the burning in my throat slowly ceasing. “Don’t you think everyone is boring?” I hadn’t really seen him look interested when anyone was speaking to him outside of his entourage.

“Not you.” He winked, nodding in approval when I tapped the choker to see if he was satisfied. “Stunning,” he muttered under his breath, sincerely. I found myself smiling a little wider at this.

“Have you met Lord Halle yet?” I asked him, picking some sapphire earrings that had belonged to my mother and began to put them in. “He’s quite the charmer – not boring at all when you get him talking. Not to mention he’s rather handsome, has a lot of money, clearly adores me...”

Jesper scoffed, rolling his golden eyes. “I did meet him, and he went on and on about the north and how much colder it is than the south. How dull indeed, he has the personality of a wet cabbage.”

I snorted at the insult – and the image.

“Would you have given him a chance if he had arrived that night you rejected my proposal?” Jesper asked, his warm fingers brushing over my shoulders as he moved to stand behind my form. “Should I start complimenting you more? Become a pirate again for more riches?”

“What about the handsome part?”

“How rude, I know you already think me handsome.”

“Keep dreaming, *darling*. But to answer your initial question, no. I would not have given Lord Halle a chance. He’s too agreeable for me, poor thing.”

“That’s true. You do seem to like someone with a little more bite.” Jesper smirked, biting the air playfully. “Like me.”

“Bold of you to assume you are forgiven after the other night,” I huffed.

Jesper tutted, and he leaned down so that his lips brushed against my ear. “I am *slightly* sorry for that. The way I told you was... uncalled for.”

“You practically threatened me.” I shook my head, but his hands moved to hold my shoulders on the puffed sleeves of the dress. I stared at his reflection once more, his golden eyes glowing as they met mine.

“Good-naturedly.” Jesper chuckled low, his body stooped. “But I was hoping it would make you open up a little more.”

My face screwed up since his reasoning was bizarre. “You thought I would open up to you if you threatened me? Do you realise how absurd that sounds?”

Jesper sighed, and he moved his hand, tilting my chin up to him. “I do now. I have never claimed to be a good man, Kitty Cat. The way I deal with things may upset you, but I am trying to be better at it. I don’t want to hurt you – I respect you far too much for that,” he explained tenderly. “The oath I made you makes me want to keep you safe, not put you in harm’s way. I usually get my way and I rarely give thought to those around me, but I want to be different for you. To be someone you can rely on.”

Was I going to be won over so easily? However, the oath was still playing on my mind. He wouldn’t risk breaking that – not if he could get hurt too. Would he?

His comments swirled in my mind as I thought them over, seeing the amber flecks in his eyes and swallowing thickly as his thumb brushed over my lip. “You want me to open up... what is it that you want to know?” I whispered to him, eventually.

“What happened to Catania?” he asked, voice steady and void of amusement. I knew that he wasn’t teasing me, and I shuddered.

His large mouth was set into a thin line, and I could see he would not budge on getting the answer. When he knew what he wanted, the man could be intimidating, I had seen it before.

Despite that, I realised that his attitude on this occasion was different. He was genuinely asking; he wanted me to let it out.

“I can’t tell you,” I murmured, my breath coming out in short, panicked puffs.

He didn’t hesitate. “Then tell me what happened to your parents.”

“You said you already knew that,” I said, avoiding his gaze now.

“Confirm it for me, my sweet.” His hand kept hold of my chin so I could not turn away, and I crumbled under his intense stare.

“They were bitten.”

“Bitten?” he asked, astonished. It was not what he expected, and that was evident in the way he released my chin to crouch at the side of my stool, his hand resting on my knee. His skin was warm, even with the layers of my dress between us.

When I closed my eyes, I could still see the night it happened. The way they begged me, apologising for things I couldn’t comprehend at the time. I licked my lips, feeling my mouth go dry. “I need you to keep an open mind, just like I did when you told me about the mutations.”

Jesper nodded and waited for me to continue. He was being surprisingly patient, which made me determined to try and tell him. Despite his behaviour the other night, he’d spent most of his time proving that I could trust him.

I cleared my throat, fiddling with the clasp of my bracelet, jittery. “My parents were holding a feast in honour of something. I can’t remember what because I wasn’t invited. I was still being kept shut away with an imaginary illness, the one that I was “magically” cured of when I was proclaimed Queen.”

“The same illness that the real Catania had?”

I nodded slowly. “Yes, she had a weak heart, or so the physician told the king and queen. Anyway, amongst the guests that arrived, since I could see them from my window – I spotted a group of men. I’d never seen them visit the castle before. I *now* know one of them was probably Sir Siwel, but I never identified the other people. When I asked one of the maids who they were, I was told they had a business proposal for the king.”

I adjusted myself so I could face him better, already beginning to feel lighter by revealing the information to him. It was so strange to hear the words leaving my lips after so long. “With them, there was a large cage that was covered up with a thick cloth. I thought it was a gift for the royal family, but I later found out that inside there was a...mutated monster.”

“How did you find out?” Jesper asked, eyes darkening in his anger.

“After the feast, I heard noises coming from down the corridor and went to take a look.”

I could still recall walking down the cold steps with nothing on my feet and the fear it still sent through me even as an adult.

Henvale Castle was not somewhere you wanted to walk around at night. But I tiptoed down the stairs, hopping over the last one with caution and biting my lip enough to taste blood.

It made my toes curl just thinking about what had happened on the stairs just a few years prior, and I chose to keep moving to where the noises were coming from.

At first, I thought it was a continuation of the celebrations of the evening – that the screaming was from joy. That quickly changed when I poked my head into the room where my parents usually held smaller parties and meetings.

It was empty, aside from a large iron cage that lay abandoned in the middle. It was as though there had been a viewing inside that had gone wrong. I could see claw marks over the wooden floor, and my eyes widened when I noticed that one of the tapestries on the wall had been torn to shreds – the faces of the goddesses unrecognisable.

There was a trail of blood that led out of the room. I shouldn’t have followed it – I should have returned to my room and locked the door behind me. The cries became louder as I followed the trail, my heart pounding in my chest hard enough that I could feel it all over my shaking body.

The sounds were deafening, and I was nearly knocked over when a group of courtiers came rushing past me – not even stopping to take a look at who they had bumped into.

As I padded through towards the throne room, I hesitated at the door when I heard voices.

“Your Majesties, you have made a grave mistake tonight, and you will pay for it. I will not make the same mistake again.”

Sir Siwel’s voice. I rushed forward when I heard a yell, pushing the heavy door open with as much strength as I could. I did not expect to be met with a near-empty throne room.

“Cate! Leave! You must go before it is too late, we’re sorry!” It sounded like my mother and father, but I could not focus on that.

A silent cry left my lips, the sound unable to reach my throat in time as I watched the mutated beast climb over my unconscious parents and bury its sharp teeth in their necks. The movements were so quick I thought it was tearing their throats out at first, but their eyes stayed opened – stayed blinking as they were attacked.

They did not deserve my help, and yet I found myself calling out. “Get off of them!”

As I rushed forward, nearly tripping over my nightgown, I watched Siwel and his men rushing to leave the room from one of the other doors. They did not look back in my direction as I got close to my parents.

The demon’s head snapped up and they stared at me. The first thing I noticed was the vibrant yellow-gold eyes that gawked at me and the way his mouth was stained with blood, dripping onto my parents’ faces and staining their skin with their own blood. Whatever they had done to the demon, or human, had completely erased their humanity.

“Girl – who are you?” the demon growled, his voice gravelly.

I could not find my own voice then. I trembled before the beast as he stood to his full height, which would measure to nearly three of me. The demon’s skin was the colour of rusted copper, and I tried not to stare at the two orange wings that sprouted from his naked back. He was wearing nothing more than some ripped trousers to keep his modesty. At the time, I had no idea he was a mutated.

“You shall die with them then–” The monster made to leap forward, his claws extended and aimed for my throat.

I watched in horror as those claws fell onto the floor, along with the hand that was attached to it. The beast let out a howl of pain, clutching his stubbed arm to his chest.

With a painful gulp, I turned to where Eriel stood, holding an axe that was stained with the monster’s blood. The beast was still yelling in his pain and before Eriel could attack again, the beast bounded from the room after Siwel.

“Cat...” Eriel whispered; his usually comforting gaze filled with fear. He couldn’t believe what he had done – what he had seen.

I dropped to my knees in the pool of blood that surrounded the bodies, Eriel following me to the ground.

“By the goddesses... no...” I gasped, trying to stir my parents from their daze. “Please, come back to me, please. I forgive you.”

My eyes were tightly closed as I tried to keep my emotions in check. Jesper's warm hands brushed over the material of my dress until they found my hands, where they were bunched in the fabric, and he encased them in his.

How this man had such a soothing effect on me still surprised me. My traitorous heart wanted him. It was why I was spilling my secrets to him.

Jesper squeezed my hands, as if able to read my emotions. "You don't have to continue, my sweet. Not if you don't want to."

"I can do it; I have to finish." I knew there would probably not be another point where I would be able to tell him. I would change my mind and shut off again, as I so desperately wanted to. "Eriel and I eventually collected ourselves – we thought my parents were probably dead. But their eyes were open, and they were foaming at the mouth, their bodies beginning to react to the bite."

"The physician was called for?" Jesper added, to which I nodded quickly.

"And he said there was nothing he could do for them. I don't know if it was venom from the mutated being, but it was turning them into something similar. The physician suggested that because they were humans, their bodies couldn't handle the changes, and they became violent and unhinged. I know now that it was probably the poison you spoke about, but my parents had no magic to merge with it."

"The bite was definitely from a mutated demon?" Jesper's brow furrowed, and his eyes drifted down to our hands as I watched him think over my story. It must have been a lot to take in.

A bitterness settled in me. *Of course, it was a lot to take in. I should never have been witness to it myself.*

"Yes," I muttered. "I had to make a decision about what to do. Eriel and the physician are the only other people that know what happened to them that night. All the courtiers who were at the celebrations just thought that there was an attack – I think they assume my parents went missing because of the beast."

"The mutated being you described does not sound like a normal demon. You saw for yourself what the mutation does, it is not that drastic."

"It might have been the wrong dosage. Or the beast was a human," I suggested.

Jesper sighed. "Yes, you might be right... it could even be that they found someone from The Fourth Kingdom to test on."

Silence fell between us for some time.

I did not look away from the man, his golden eyes flittering about as he tried to make sense of it all. His warm hands continued to grip mine. His affection was something I was beginning to crave and whilst it was a dangerous thing to let myself give into, I wanted to grant myself this one thing.

"Why are you telling me all this?" Jesper said, eyes flickering back up to mine, holding my gaze.

"You asked me to open up and tell you more about myself, and that is one of the biggest things about me," I whispered, "and since you made me that oath..."

"You're giving me something of a similar nature," he ended in understanding, and I just hummed my agreement.

The man gave my hands a squeeze as he rose to his feet and let them go, folding his arms across his chest. "What happened to your parents after that night?"

I missed his touch already. *Pathetic.*

"You're not asking much, are you?" I half-joked, letting out a small, humourless laugh.

"Well, I'm assuming they're still alive, which is why you were so on edge when I mentioned them the night we met." Jesper shrugged. "Unless I'm wrong, but I'm hardly every wrong," he teased, the corners of his red lips twitching.

I was glad for the playful side of him. It lightened the mood – despite the dark topic.

Chuckling again, I straightened up so I could look up at him. My smile fell as I began to answer him. "They're alive and being kept in a cell in the depths of the castle's dungeon. The physician is the one guarding them. He's monitoring the progress of the bite and how it changes them."

"They're here? In the castle?" Jesper's eyes went wide, and he let out a huff of surprise. "You're brave keeping them here, with all those lords snooping about. With *me* snooping about, Kitty Cat."

I rolled my eyes as he mentioned himself. "I'm not a fool. No one can find where they are in the dungeons. I made sure of that. Eriel goes down

weekly to check the progress and to see if the old physician needs anything.”

“Do you think you can keep them down there forever?”

His question had me shaking my head quickly. “Of course not, but for now they wouldn’t be fit to rule, and I can’t tell the people what happened. Until we know the full extent of the dangers, I don’t want to panic people,” I answered diplomatically, my shoulders tense.

“Very queenly of you indeed.” The man laughed softly, and he tapped my nose with his finger before turning to look about the room. I scrunched my nose up in response to the tap and watched him.

“Will you keep my secret?” I asked, chewing the inside of my cheek uneasily.

Jesper shrugged his broad shoulders. “I don’t see why not. You’re not against me and what I believe in. Also, from what I know of the previous king and queen, you’ll be doing a better job than them at ruling. I have no reason to stand in your way, especially not if we are to marry.”

“You know that we’re not.” I clicked my tongue. “It’s all fake.”

“For now, Kitty Cat. You never know, you might fall madly in love with me and really want to get married,” he teased, looking over his shoulder, eyes sparkling in the dim light. The shadows on his face highlighted his sharp features, and the silver glitter by his eyes twinkled. Even his hair seemed to glow, it looked soft to the touch.

He truly was one of the most beautiful people I had ever seen.

“You’re incorrigible,” I said with a chuckle, turning back to finish and making myself look as perfect and pristine as possible.

I opened the box that contained the crown I’d selected for the evening and placed it on my head. It was my favourite. The ornate golden leaf crown was decorated with various jewels, but my favourite was the large sapphire in the centre – and it matched the earrings.

Jesper’s footsteps echoed as he moved about, his boots making him unable to move quietly. It was strange because his presence was reassuring to me. I felt at ease to turn my back on him, which was not something I felt with many people.

Was I becoming soft?

However, the people who had been cruel to me in the past were no longer standing in my way. Perhaps I needed more help than just Eriel and Willen.

“Is that one of yours?” Jesper asked, pointing to the lone painting in the bedroom. I rose from the stool and moved to stand at his side.

Shaking my head, I tapped the corner where it was signed by someone else. “I don’t recognise the signature, but it was given to me many years ago now, left outside my door. There was no note, and I had to keep it hidden for so long that the ink faded.”

The painting was of a forest. The leaves were turning orange, and the floor was littered with fallen leaves. A figure had their back turned as they walked through the trees, the colours surrounding swirling together to look like the wind was blowing. It was meant to be a peaceful scene.

“Interesting... I think I have seen this style before,” he muttered, scratching his chin. “But I’m no artist myself, so I couldn’t be sure.”

“But I thought you liked art?” I asked him, turning my head up to him.

Jesper chuckled and offered his arm to me, which I slid my own through. “I do like it. I’m just not very good at it, remember?”

“Maybe we should revisit that conversation about me giving you a lesson,” I teased.

“Hm, that depends, are we friends again, Kitty Cat?” Jesper said, a smile forming on his lips, his teeth showing. His smile was the most perilous thing I had ever witnessed. *It could make my knees turn to jelly.*

“That’s still up for debate,” I answered, just as we rounded the corner to where Eriel and Riddel were deep in conversation.

I was surprised to see the two together, but I could see that their words were serious, the two of them set with firm expressions on their faces.

The first person to notice us was Riddel, who stopped Eriel from speaking by placing a hand on his shoulder. “Your Majesty. Lord Ulara,” she greeted formally, her bright eyes twinkling, and it made me jealous of how pretty they truly were.

“What are you two conspiring about?” Jesper asked.

“Ah, I don’t believe you’ve met Eriel properly, My Lord.” Riddel raised a hand to Eriel. “This is Lord Eriel Swan. Her Majesty’s second in command.”

Jesper’s head snapped down to look at me, his eyes narrowed in suspicion. “Your right hand was a man all this time?”

“You thought he was a woman?” I asked in amusement. “I thought I made it rather clear – you saw him at the masque. We’ve also spoken about *him* many times.”

Eriel had flushed at this, embarrassed. Jesper looked him up and down before laughing boldly. “I did know that I just like teasing him.”

Eriel cleared his throat, clearly not enjoying the conversation. “Let us not waste any more time, My Queen. Your guests are waiting.”

“That’s you told off, Kitty Cat. Go on, do the same for me, Eri,” Jesper taunted, pulling me closer to his side with our interlinked arms.

Eriel ignored Jesper and turned his back to us, leading the way down the staircase and towards the dining hall. “Awh, he’s no fun,” Jesper complained with a chuckle.

I missed the last step, as had become customary for me when descending the staircase. Jesper raised an eyebrow but said nothing as we copied me, and continued to walk.

The castle lit by candles was always a beautiful sight. The staff had outdone themselves at Eriel’s request – different coloured materials were placed over the candles to reflect different tinted lights off the walls. It was not something that could be done all the time – but that was what made it even more special.

The dark corners of the dreary castle no longer frightened me as I walked with the group of people, my heart feeling lighter after my revelation to Jesper.

He was someone who would be on my side. I knew that, and I had to learn to trust him. I couldn’t keep beating the man down, even with his words after the joust.

He had made a mistake. I would give him the benefit of the doubt for that.

Riddel winked at me when I looked up at her, as if able to read my thoughts. The woman wore a deep-purple dress, almost the colour of blackberries, the pleats in the skirt coming up to just under her breast, where her top was black velvet – with long sleeves that hugged her arms. Decked in purple jewels, that hung from her neck, arms, and hair, she looked more regal than I.

It was a style that I’d never seen before but was a nod to the fashion of another kingdom, perhaps the one where she was born. She towered above me, just short of Jesper himself. “He seems to be in a good mood after visiting you,” she commented, dropping back to walk at my side.

“Was he not before?”

“Oh no, he was positively distraught that he had pushed you away,” Riddel told me, her openness enlightening.

“Stop whispering about me.” Jesper tugged my arm again, and I chuckled, looking up at him.

“Yes, *darling*,” I teased, leaving him no room to react as the heavy doors to the dining hall were thrown open and the people stood to greet us.

The large dining hall was somewhere I often avoided – the space was so hard to fill, and I just preferred the smaller one. However, it looked incredible that evening. It must have been one of the most expensive parts of the castle – the floor was a black marble and the walls a deep shade of red that made the place dark.

The walls were decorated with paintings of the monarchs, as well as the stories that continued to circulate to the modern day. The ceiling had been intricately designed with flowers and other shapes, a mixture of the Crimonian blue, gold, and white. But my favourite was the golden moon and stars in the centre of the array of patterns. It was a flashy room – but it showed off the wealth of the royal family.

Jesper’s hand moved to rest over mine as we walked down between the tables towards the head table on the dais. Narim was already waiting next to my chair, a bright boyish smile on his face, dressed in his furs from the north despite the warmth. I wondered if it was to make a point to everyone.

Jesper scoffed, his nose scrunching up a little as he followed where my gaze had been. “Is he always like that?”

“Like what?” I asked.

“Charming,” he spat the word out, envious of the man that radiated happiness.

“He’s the exact opposite of you, isn’t he, *darling*?” I joked again, giving his arm a squeeze before letting him go as I moved to stand in front of my seat.

Suddenly, his hand shot out and caught hold of my skirts. I nearly tripped at the gesture, trying not to look alarmed when he tugged on the material playfully, out of sight from the guests. Jesper spoke low, so that no one would hear him, “I think we’ll have to talk about your name-calling later, Kitty Cat. It’s not fair that you catch me off guard like that.”

“Would you rather I warned you?” I asked slowly, still in shock.

He shook his head, grinning. “No, you should just call me it all the time.”

I scoffed but could not help the smile that formed on my face. “Never going to happen, Ulara.”

“I’ll have to change your mind about that.” Jesper shrugged his broad shoulders and let go of my dress finally, a mischievous glint in his eyes.

Spotting Arka strolling behind the chairs, Jesper made an elegant signal with his hand and the wolf settled on the other side of his seat, laying down obediently. It still surprised me how tame the wolf was. And he was never usually that far away from his master.

Well, apart from when he was with me or with Riddel. The wolf had as many trust issues as I did, apparently.

Jesper smiled broadly, and he seemed at ease on my left side.

I turned to address the people in the room and raised my hands with as much confidence as I could muster. “I am pleased to welcome you all here this evening to celebrate... my birthday.” I faltered for just a moment. I needed to get a hold of myself – *it’s not like I knew when my real birthday was anyway.* “I thank you all for your gifts.” My eyes drifted to the side of the room, where presents were piled high on one of the tables. “And your presence here. Please enjoy the festivities, and let the feast begin!”

It felt wrong to celebrate on Catania’s birthday. She was long gone and no one even remembered who I was. Who *Cate* was.

The staff began to place the food on the tables, and I took my seat, breathing out in relief. “You did well, Kitty Cat,” Jesper said, his gaze burning into the side of my head, and I turned my chin to him.

“I know.”

This made him chuckle. “I was trying to compliment you.”

“I know that too.” A small smile formed on my lips, placing some of the roast potatoes on my plate with some vegetables.

“Infuriating woman,” he grumbled, but I could tell he was amused at the situation. He placed some more food on my plate, and I bit the inside of my cheek to stop a smile. “Can’t have the queen going hungry, now, can we?”

Impulsively, I placed my hand over his warmer one and gave it a squeeze. “Thank you,” I told him, quietly. “For noticing me.”

Jesper’s eyebrows raised, his face becoming serious for a moment. He did not need to think of what to say because the words left his lips easily.

“How could I not notice you, my sweet? Every part of you is irresistible from your mind and soul to your face and body. You are perfection itself.”

My cheeks turned hot at his words, and I did not know how to respond – so I didn’t. I’d never expected such a sincere compliment, and I didn’t know what to do with such information.

Music filled the hall after I gestured to the conductor of the musicians. The music was light and airy, with a mixture of instruments getting their time to shine.

I took a sip of wine as I listened to the chatter about the room, my eyes settling on the ladies at one table. They were enjoying each other’s company, aside from the Josephite sisters. Posy’s cheeks were as red as her hair as Riddel let her hand rest on her shoulder when she spoke to Kalline.

“Does she know what she’s doing?” I eventually asked Jesper, leaning close to him, curious about the woman he was so close to.

Jesper tore his stare away from my face and his angular eyes narrowed a little. “What, you mean Riddel flirting with the woman?” When I nodded, he continued, “Of course she does. Riddel doesn’t do anything without a purpose. She’s a very precise woman.”

Riddel had turned her attention to the blushing redhead, and they seemed to be conversing. Posy smiled as Riddel smirked, her hand sliding down Posy’s arm seductively as she sat down beside her.

“Rather than watching them, I think you should converse with me,” Jesper said, but I turned when Narim called to me.

“Your Majesty!”

“Yes, Lord Halle?” I asked evenly, beginning to eat my food deliberately, savouring the flavours for once. Everything was cooked to perfection. I enjoyed the food and appreciated the effort that went into making it. I would be sure to ask Eriel to send word to the cooks after the meal.

“I wanted to say how lovely you look this evening, Your Majesty. Your fiancé is an incredibly lucky man,” Narim complimented, putting some food on his own plate in the process.

Jesper’s hand landed possessively on my thigh, and I was glad that my chair was tucked in enough that Narim would not be able to see. I knew Jesper was trying to get my attention, but I kept my eyes on the younger man. “You are very kind, Lord Halle.”

“Not at all, Majesty. I am still most upset I was not able to visit you sooner. Your castle is magnificent, far more spectacular than I remember it being too,” Narim continued to throw compliments around. He clearly enjoyed the sound of his own gruff voice as he left no room for me to interject again.

Jesper’s hand rubbed my thigh, and I felt him pull the skirt up with his fingers until he raised it enough to drop his hand onto my bare skin. My back straightened, and I hesitated as I raised my fork to my mouth, a shaky breath leaving my body.

“Does he ever shut up?” Jesper mumbled to me, but I couldn’t find the words to reply, his touch distracting.

Narim was still chatting away, only pausing to glug his wine, and I realised his cheeks were turning rosy. He must be getting drunk.

Jesper’s hand did not stop, his fingers brushing higher up my inner thigh. I glanced at him reluctantly, waiting to see if he would continue.

Jesper smirked and raised his hand higher in response, his fingers brushing past anything in their way, wanting to find skin. I coughed to cover up my gasp and gripped my cutlery so tight I could feel it indenting in my hands as his fingers stroked between my legs. The pain from the cutlery was not distraction enough. Instead, I was focused only on his touch.

“Is everything alright, Kitty Cat?” Jesper asked, leaning his elbow on the table with his head in his other hand, eyes not leaving me.

I could have told him to get off. And yet, the words didn’t want to leave my lips. “Yes, darling,” I muttered, teasing him too.

Jesper drew in a breath, his fingers ghosting over my bud, which made me fidget in my seat. “Are you not enjoying your food?” he taunted.

I turned to face him, my lips parting as he pressed down harder, beginning to make a circling motion. He raised his eyebrow as he waited to see if I would react.

“You need to stop,” I said, my words a gasp, letting go of my knife to place my hand on his arm.

“Are you sure?” he asked, but I didn’t answer, knowing he would see through my lie. I shook my head subtly and snatched my goblet after dropping my fork onto the table, taking a gulp of the wine to divert myself.

However, his circling fingers continued.

My body was responding to his heavy petting, and his stare was curious as I turned my face back to him.

It felt as though he was studying my reactions as if he wanted the memorise them. He would slow his fingers and I would try and press myself against his hand once more, my thighs trying to trap his hand there, which gained a low chuckle from him. “How naughty you are, Kitty Cat.”

The sounds that wanted to leave my lips were firmly kept down by me continuing to gulp my wine until there was no more. He fastened his fingers again, and I closed my eyes for a moment, appreciating the feeling.

“Your Majesty, are you going to finish?” a voice cut through my pleasure.

“I hope so.”

“Pardon, Majesty?” Narim was startled by my response, and I flushed as I reluctantly released Jesper’s hand, my body craving his attention once more. His hand lingered on my thigh before letting me go, although he also looked disappointed.

“My apologies, what did you say?” I muttered, hoping my cheeks would not give away how flustered I really was. But Jesper’s fingers had felt divine, and I had myself wishing I could pull him some place private and continue.

As if reading my thoughts, Jesper interrupted the conversation, “How about we play a game, Your Majesty? You still have yet to show me the maze, and I’m sure your guests would enjoy it... there are plenty of places to lose yourself.” He winked.

“A game. What a good idea, Lord Ulara!” Narim was the one who encouraged it, and I heard Jesper let out a small groan, annoyed by the man’s cheerful mood.

I brushed some imaginary crumbs off my lap, unsatisfied, and my thighs clenched together. “A good idea, darling. I will have the guests informed that after dinner that is what we shall do,” I said, already thinking about a way I could get lost in the maze with my handsome fiancé.

And I was still imagining what his fingers felt like.

The maze at Henvale Castle was an artistic feature that Queen Melisa had constructed just before the bite. She was jealous of the rumours that the royal family of Dalvesta had one similar and ended up demanding her husband find the money to pay for such an extravagance. The villages

surrounding the castle had been anything but pleased with such a lavish display of wasting money.

However, the maze was a sight to behold. I'd only seen it from the window in my chambers and often wondered if I would ever find an excuse to go in – and now I'd been presented with the perfect opportunity.

Motioning for Eriel to join me from his place at one of the tables, he bowed down as I muttered the plan to him, "The maze? I mean, I thought you had planned for the festivities to remain in here." He frowned.

"A change of plans. It would be fun, wouldn't it?" I asked, doubting myself for a moment.

"Well, you have always wanted to visit them, Cat." Eriel sighed, not able to argue with me. "I'm just a little worried about having everyone unaccounted for."

"Do you expect someone to act out?" My eyes widened, and I grabbed a hold of his arm to tug him closer, his hand resting on the arm of my chair. All thoughts of pleasure before were gone and replaced with my brain working to think of a solution.

Jesper had leaned closer too, and Eriel rolled his eyes. "Can we speak some place with fewer eavesdroppers, My Queen?"

"Whatever you want to say, you can say in front of him. He's already proved himself trustworthy, Eriel," I answered assertively.

"As you wish." Eriel was reluctant but agreed, turning so his back would be to Jesper. I thought it amusing but tried to hide my smile. "Lord Olliea has been consuming a lot of alcohol, even before he arrived, but amongst the nonsense he's spouting, there seems to be a warning. To you."

That wiped the smile off my face completely.

"What kind of warning?" Jesper asked, lips set into a firm line.

With a sigh, Eriel adjusted his collar. "It mentioned Her Majesty's claim to the throne. That someone important knows the truth and they will reveal it when you least expect it. I'm assuming that means Sir Siwel, but he keeps saying there are people closer to your side that are involved."

"Sir Siwel is not present. He said he had to return home, that his wife needed him." I frowned, but my eyes flickered to Jesper at the mention of the woman. His face was stoic.

Eriel clicked his tongue to get my attention back to him. "Then it could be anyone else here, Cat." His gaze focused on mine again, and I nodded, understanding why he was so worried about the game.

“Still, I think we should go ahead,” I answered, looking between the men with determination. “We will just have to keep alert. Tomorrow I will have everyone investigated; their rooms searched under the guise that something has been stolen – perhaps something might be uncovered that way?”

“It is a good idea,” Eriel mused.

“I can lead the search, Queenie,” Jesper offered. “I’ll take Riddel with me.”

Nodding in agreement, I shifted to the edge of my seat. “Has Willen left for the north base yet?”

“None yet, Majesty. The journey is long and even hoping they had good weather they thought it best they wait until morning.” Eriel shook his head, resting his hand on my shoulder to squeeze it. “But we will put an end to this soon. You have my word that I will make sure we find them.”

“And mine,” Jesper added quickly, trying to move his head round Eriel’s body, and I let out a short laugh at how eager he seemed. His eyes gleamed when he watched me do so.

Eriel practically groaned as he let go of my arm. “I can’t believe this...” he muttered, more to himself than to me. He pointed his finger at Jesper. “I’m keeping an eye on you, Fox. Her Majesty might trust you, but I don’t. When you slip up, which you undoubtedly will, I’m going to make sure you crawl back to your little island.”

Eriel’s protective side was sweet. I knew my friend would follow through with his words too.

“Oh, I thought we were on a first-name basis now, Eriel? You wound me.” Jesper patted the place on his chest over his heart.

Eriel scoffed, his usually kind eyes hard. “I’ll wound you fatally if you hurt her. I’m not afraid of you.”

Jesper leaned back in his chair, body relaxed as he smirked. *I knew he was going to say something rude only moments before he did.* “Says the queen’s little bitch who hangs off her every word.”

I’d never seen Eriel so quick to anger before. His hands flexed at his sides, and I wondered if he really would hit Jesper. “I’m not the only one who has a soft spot for the queen now, am I, you bastard?”

“You two stop it. That’s enough name-calling – it’s like listening to two adolescent boys.” I stood up, knowing they would have to go silent.

I could feel the rage emanating from Eriel as I asked for quiet. Jesper merely looked amused, his finger brushing over his lips as he smiled.

I wondered if perhaps I should have heeded Eriel's warning... about everything.

Chapter Twenty-One



Whoever reached the centre of the maze first would be granted a prize of their choosing, and it had been decided by Eriel that everyone would go in pairs.

He was being thorough – I'd give him that.

Some people had chosen to spectate, a few older members of the court, but most people had decided to play – as the maze had never been opened to the public.

I supposed they hoped that if they won, it would gain them some recognition with me as well.

We all left the hall and walked through the rose gardens. It became darker the further we walked away from the castle, and some lanterns had been lit to guide our path. There was nothing other than a few burning torches by the time we reached the maze. Eventually, we arrived at one of the entrances.

The maze was built of large hedges, the leaves a mix of greens swirling together to make it seem almost black in the night.

It was daunting to look at, and I wondered how far back it really went. An excitement bubbled within me at the idea of running along the paths, trying to find my way to the centre as I'd always dreamed of doing when I looked at it from the window. *It was a pity I'd never been able to see the centre before, I might have been able to cheat.*

However, getting to the centre was not my priority. I was excited by the thought of finding Jesper in one of the dark corners.

“It’s incredible,” Narim muttered. “I have never seen anything so magnificent.”

Posy had nestled her way against my side, her hand holding onto my wrist. “I’ve only ever heard stories of the maze, Cat. It’s so exhilarating.”

“Who are you paired with, Posy?” I asked gently, a smile forming on my lips as the girl managed to soften my attitude towards her.

“Oh... well, Riddel asked me.” The red-haired woman blushed, and she fiddled with the material of her green dress, the colour a stark contrast to her hair. It was almost the same colour as the maze, with a lighter green stomacher and the satin of her skirt was bunched in certain places – pinned with pearls. Another one of Kalline’s creations, no doubt. I even thought I saw the material sparkle when she moved.

Smiling, I glanced to where Riddel was waiting with Kalline. Despite talking to one another, Riddel’s lilac eyes were on Posy. The woman caught me staring, and she smirked, tilting her head politely in greeting.

“She’s quite charming, isn’t she?” I whispered to Posy, looking back at the woman who was still clinging to me. “You must be feeling excited.”

“Yes, certainly. My father would surely give me a good beating if he found out I was...” she trailed off, hesitating.

I squeezed her hand gently, managing to keep my anger at her mistreatment at bay. “Your secret is safe with me, Posy. And with the other women,” I promised her, sensing her struggle as she bit her bottom lip, chewing the skin there. She fluttered her white fan against her face, hiding her expression from onlookers.

“I really... shouldn’t like her, should I? Not like I would a man...” she whispered, but I immediately frowned.

“You are allowed to like whoever – any man, woman, human, demon, those who don’t identify as any of those I listed. Anyone you want to like, Posy. No matter what your family might think, it is not wrong. To love is an amazing thing – an incredible gift. The goddesses would want for you to be happy; you must remember that.”

She needed reassurance. I just hoped my words could help.

It warmed my heart to see the younger woman grin. Her eyes filled with unshed tears, and she leaned up to press her soft lips to my cheek. I stood still, shocked. The contact was still so new to me.

“Thank you, Your Majesty. You truly are a wonderful ruler, and I am glad to call you my friend... if I may?” Posy smiled shyly. The usually bubbly and certain girl was unsure of herself in the situation, which made me chuckle.

“Of course,” I assured her, watching as she rushed to the group, but she stopped to wave at me once she was there. Riddel placed a hand on the woman’s shoulder and pulled her closer to her side. Posy tucked herself under the woman’s arm comfortably, and I was glad she did not seem to care as people glanced their way, some women whispering behind their fans.

I did not miss the way Riddel gazed down at Posy, a smile playing on her lips as she squeezed her shoulders and leaned down to whisper to her – her dark hair falling in front of her face. They both wore thin twisted bracelets around their wrists – Riddel’s I had seen before, but the lilac thread on Posy’s wrist was new to me.

“Nicely handled,” Jesper commented, as he pushed his way to my side, nudging his arm against mine.

I rolled my eyes and linked our arms together, hearing Narim’s disheartened sigh from behind us.

Oh well, I could only keep him so happy.

I looked up at Jesper. “Don’t patronise me, darling.” I smirked, patting his chest. I delighted in seeing his pupils dilate and then his gaze narrowed as I turned to Narim.

The young lord looked as though he were overheating in his furs, a few beads of sweat on his brow. “Do you need a partner, Lord Halle?”

Narim smiled brightly and reached for my hand. “It would be an honour, Majesty–”

“I am so glad to hear you say so. The two of you will make a wonderful pairing,” I said, reaching behind for Jesper’s arm to pull him over to the northern man.

“You’ve got to be joking,” Jesper answered incredulously, staring down at me with wide eyes, begging me with his gaze to change my mind.

Narim also looked miserable, stuttering, “A-are you sure this is wise? Who will you partner with, Majesty?”

Before I could think my plan through, I pointed to where Lady Mirana stood on her own, fiddling with her fingers in the hopes that someone might pick her as their partner. “I have some apologising to do, gentleman.

Now, both of you try to get along,” I teased, letting go of them and stalking towards the timid woman.

It pleased me to know the men had to follow my orders – especially if they both wanted to keep in my good graces.

Mirana’s gaze settled on me and remained a moment longer than she usually dared before looking down at her feet. “Your Majesty.”

“Will you be my partner, sweet one?” I asked, knowing the woman would agree – especially if she didn’t want me to punish her for snooping in my room. I shuffled impatiently as I waited for her response.

“You are kind, Majesty, but I cannot accept for you see I have already been asked–”

“Nonsense. Your partner has already found someone else.” I didn’t bother to look as I linked our arms together. Her eyes darted about as we lined up at the entrance.

I joined our hands together slowly so that we would stay close to one another, and I hoped that everyone would rush ahead, and I would get a moment to talk to her alone. Mirana came across as quiet, but she knew a lot about what was going on in the elite families.

Apologies would have to wait.

Eriel was standing to one side, his arm raised in the air as he called for quiet. The man never failed to impress me with how he could control so many people – he was made for the role of my second in command. He turned his head to me, and I mouthed, “Where is Willen?”

After glancing around, Eriel shrugged in response. When he turned back, I gave a subtle nod before he announced that we should begin – with or without Willen. He may have retired early to be ready for his journey the next day.

I led the way inside, following the rowdy inebriated court members, since Mirana was reluctant to move. I pulled her along behind me, wondering if she was dragging her feet to purposely annoy me.

The group in front of us rushed off, as did the couple that had stood behind, and then the sounds of directions and laughs died down as we fell behind.

After feeling her tug on my hand in her refusal to move very far, I snatched my hand back out of hers. “Is there a problem, Mirana?” I asked, my lips tightening in disapproval.

Mirana shook her head, but I rolled my eyes and turned around to her, grabbing her shoulders.

I shook her roughly, knowing it would have the desired effect, and her head snapped up in surprise. There was a flash of anger on her face before she spoke.

“There’s nothing wrong!” she shouted. I raised an eyebrow at her outburst, and she had the good grace to flush. “I meant that there is not a problem, Majesty.”

“Oh, come now. At least make it believable when you lie.” I had a knack for pushing people, and I would make her give in, eventually.

There was no need to feel shame about asking questions that I needed answers to.

I walked towards her until she stumbled into one of the hedges, her auburn hair mixing in with the leaves. Her grey eyes were lacklustre as I stared into them. “It would be in your best interests to tell your queen what has you so worried – perhaps I can help?”

“You can’t do anything for me. I know you intend to destroy my father and his reputation. I don’t want to betray him.” Her bottom lip trembled, and I realised how much she was grating on me.

The pathetic ruse was not making me feel sorry for her at all.

“Your life will be much simpler if you would, Mirana. Only your father would suffer, the rest of your family would still be welcomed at court.” It was not entirely true. I would exile her family from court, but she did not need to know that. It was best not to risk the rest of the family plotting against me too.

Mirana’s eyes darted behind me, and she let out a ridiculous whimper. “He is planning to travel north after today. I don’t know why.”

He could be going north to join Siwel and Olliea. What if he was the third man?

Despite her words, I had my doubts that she was being honest. She had no reason to be, and I’d often seen her and her sister looking at me with disdain.

Her grey eyes filled with tears, and I threw those thoughts aside for the moment. “Get out of my sight. You remind me of your traitorous father.”

“My father is no traitor.” She tried to stick her chin up to me – wanting to seem taller than she was. “He just does not wish to serve a female monarch – it is not... *natural*.”

I tilted my head to one side, reaching forward to pluck a leaf from her hair, watching the way she flinched in response. “Who is your father to say what is and what is not natural?” I asked her slowly, as though she was stupid. My finger twirled a piece of her hair around it, watching the ringlet bounce back when I let it go. “You would do well to remember that your father’s word means nothing in comparison to mine, or the goddesses, sweet one.”

“You are a despicable woman. I saw... saw what you did that night!” She gasped, accusatory.

I raised an eyebrow. *This* was new information, and it sent a small wave of panic through me. I tugged on her hair as I gripped hold of it. “What night?”

There was a loud group of people that passed by the bush behind Mirana – their cries of laughter enough to break up our conversation. “Mirana,” I pressed. “What night?”

“I do not wish to tell you,” Mirana sobbed. She sniffed and pushed past my body towards the exit, and I closed my eyes as I heard her cries, pinching the bridge of my nose in frustration.

The girl was unlikeable. To me anyway. Her tears might have been endearing to others.

Her confession could have been important, but I knew I would get no more answers that evening.

Instead of going after her, I continued down some of the pathways, trying to locate the middle. As much as I’d begged Eriel to give me the route so I could cheat, the man had refused. He said it would be good for my character – *the cheek of it!*

I almost jumped out of my skin when someone turned the corner I was about to go round, but I realised it was a familiar silver-banged man. He did not look startled at all, a lazy smirk settled on his face as he stopped in front of me. “Finally, I’ve been looking for you, Kitty Cat.”

Fluttering erupted in my stomach.

“Did you abandon Lord Halle? I told you to stay with him.” I rolled my eyes but found that my anger from before was disappearing. *Maybe I was actually glad to see him.*

Jesper grinned. “I told you – he’s boring. You’re far more fun to be around. Don’t think I will forget how you palmed me off onto him for that Josephite girl.” He tutted and brushed his hand over my shoulder, then

down my arm until his hand encased mine. It was a nice feeling, the warmth from his hand spreading through my body, and I found that it calmed me after all that had happened with Mirana.

“You’re just obsessed with me, aren’t you?” I teased.

“Something like that.” Jesper smirked. “You *might* even be my favourite person. How does that sound?”

“It sounds like horse shit.” I snorted, not believing a word of it, pulling my hand away. “I’ll race you to the middle. The first one there gets to ask for a favour.”

“I like the sound of that. When do we start—”

I started to run before he could finish his sentence, hearing profanities leave his lips as his footsteps thundered after mine. I didn’t think about where I was going – I just ran away from all the other voices in the maze, in the hopes that I would not crash into anyone.

My fingers gripped the leaves of the hedges to steady myself as I darted around corners, some of the pathways growing thinner, leaving hardly any room to get through.

Teasing him was fun. I knew what I wanted to happen when he finally caught up to me – I was not going to deprive myself of him anymore.

It was dark as I turned down another pathway, far from the middle. The torches had not been put this far in, and I wondered if I had taken a wrong turning – maybe even stumbled into an area of the maze that was out of bounds.

My heart was pounding in my chest, but I let out a thrilled laugh, the excitement, and the idea of getting caught merging in my mind.

I gasped loudly as a warm hand wrapped around my wrist and turned me to press against a firm chest.

“Playing hide and seek, are we, Kitty Cat?” Jesper asked sensually, his voice low as his hands caught my waist instead.

“What are you going to do now you’ve found me, darling?” I purred, running my hand down his chest playfully.

He licked his lips slowly as his eyes darkened and his pupils dilated. I could feel his chest moving as he breathed deeply, a mixture of catching his breath and excitement.

There was a connection between us that I could not deny – a sizzling energy that I would not refute any longer.

I wanted to memorise every part of him. To touch him. I was drawn into his gaze, my hand slowly cupping his length over the leather, hearing him grunt at the sudden touch.

“Oh, I’m going to play another kind of game now, Kitty Cat. One that involves making you lose some of that control you so desperately hold on to. Give it to me and let me make you mine,” he growled against my ear as he caught part of it between his teeth.

My body arched into him at the idea, sucking my lip between my teeth at the feeling of his mouth on my skin. He trailed from my ear down to my neck, where he nipped the skin again, eliciting a moan from me. Every touch was causing my body to tingle in anticipation.

I let him go and moved my hands to trail up his back; the material of his coat getting caught with my fingers. “As you wish, *darling*.”

“Good girl.” I felt his lips form a smile against my skin, and he ran his hands down to cup my behind to lift me up into his strong hold. I gasped at the sudden movement and felt his nose brush along my jaw before he pulled away to make eye contact again. “Now, don’t let go of me. Understand?”

Oh, I understood.

I answered by tangling my fingers in his hair and giving the strands a tug, pulling his lips onto mine in a passionate kiss.

It was everything I had imagined and more.

He responded immediately. His tongue parted my lips, and we battled for dominance of the hungry kiss, the two of us tugging at the material of the other’s clothes.

Our teeth scraped as we both tried to consume one another, his tongue exploring my mouth and leaving me utterly defenceless against him. It felt so right to finally feel his lips on mine.

“I’ve wanted to do this since the moment I laid eyes on you,” Jesper groaned against my mouth.

“Thank you for waiting for me to be ready,” I muttered back, my hand tugging on his soft hair again.

Jesper bit down on my bottom lip, which caused me to yelp softly. He pulled away from my mouth for just a moment. “There is nothing for you to say thank you for, Kitty Cat. I’d never act on my desires if you didn’t want me to – it’s common decency. The bare minimum,” he whispered.

“But–”

“Uh-uh. Unless you wish to back out, let’s talk later,” Jesper teased, pressing his lips back to mine with a more intense desire than before.

His hands wandered up my skirts to push them higher up my legs, and I gulped as he squeezed my behind.

Excitement consumed me.

He took this as an opportunity to pull my undergarments off my legs, skilfully moving us so that he did not need to set me down or break our intense kiss.

I could taste the wine on his tongue and found it did not taste as bad when it came from him. His silver tongue was good for more than just talking, it appeared. I knew he was not a gentle man, and I did not mind when he pressed me up against the nearest hedge, the twigs and leaves digging into my back in an uncomfortable way.

I was too thrilled to care. Maybe I didn’t hate being backed into everything.

“Tell me, my sweet, are you sure about this?” he growled against my lips, his hands squeezing my behind again, and it made our hips grind together. I felt my body pool with need for him.

Every moment we had been close before reminded me of how much I wanted it. *Of how much I wanted to feel him inside of me.*

“Surer than I have been about anything else in my life,” I assured him, nipping his bottom lip and running my tongue over it slowly to soothe. This earned me a guttural groan from the man, and he hoisted his arms beneath my legs to lift me onto his arms, his face ducking beneath my skirts.

My legs were draped over his shoulders, and he hitched the layers of my skirts up. The man had certainly proven his heightened strength, and it made my toes curl in my satin slippers – which dangled precariously from my feet at the new position.

“You better not let go of me,” I said, my voice filled with anticipation.

One of my hands curled in his red hair, and I let out a satisfied sound as he kissed my inner thighs. His arms were steady, but I still lodged my other hand into the hedge – gripping the leaves as a way of supporting myself. I didn’t really notice the sharp pain it sent through my skin.

“I won’t drop you, Kitty Cat. I’ve been wanting this far too much to ruin the moment.” His tone was sultry. “I’ve thought about this every night – I wanted to come and seek you out but I stopped myself.”

“Why?” I grit out, his breath tickling me.

He chuckled, which only made me clench. “I was waiting for the perfect moment to completely worship you,” he muttered, and he ran his nose over my folds, inhaling.

My eyes widened at this. “Fuck, Utara. By the goddesses—” I cursed but moaned softly as his lips attached to my bud and he began to swirl his tongue.

I wondered if I focused more, would I be able to see the routes in the maze, the people rushing about? Jesper was tall, and the extra height he had given me would surely put me close to the top of the hedge. However, it was a fleeting thought as I shook in his arms and against his expert tongue.

My breath quickened, the excitement at potentially being caught only heightened my senses, and I tugged on his hair again – feeling him smile against me.

“Does that feel good, my sweet? Do you like it when I use my tongue on you?” he drawled, his tongue swiping over my folds, his hands still gripping my behind tightly – I was sure it might leave marks. His eyes flickered up to me as I stared at him, my lips parted in bliss.

“Yes – and you had better not stop.”

“What would you do if I did?” he teased, repeating the action from before.

“I’ll... I’ll...” I wracked my brain for something to say.

“Are you without spiteful remarks, Kitty Cat? Well, well... the cat really has got your tongue.” Jesper smirked at his own joke. He placed his mouth back on my bud, and I gasped as he teased my folds with his fingers before slowly inserting two. His tongue continued to flick expertly, and I squirmed.

None of my previous lovers had been as talented as him.

“You taste heavenly, my sweet. How I have been waiting for this...” Jesper growled against me, adding a third finger before he curled them inside me. “I can’t wait to be inside you, fulfilling all your desires.”

I was soon crying out at his actions, clenching around his fingers as I gripped the leaves in my fists tighter.

Jesper replaced his fingers with his tongue, and it delved inside of me, as though he were tasting me.

His eyes flickered up when he had finished lapping at my centre, and I watched as he wiped his mouth with his thumb and index finger, a wicked smile on his lips.

“I told you I’m rather good with my tongue,” he teased before standing up. I let out a huff in frustration and caught my arms around his neck as he lowered me back onto his hips. I could feel his hardness pressing against my thigh.

“You’re insufferable,” I whispered, my own voice filled with a lust it hadn’t held before. I moaned as he pressed his hot mouth against mine again, and I felt his hand brush between us as he undid the button on his trousers.

He pulled away for air, our noses brushing. The limited light in the maze made it all the more special when his eyes met mine, the sparkle in his gilded gaze only comparable to the most intricate art. I could see the flecks of brown within and the way his mark stretched when he smiled. *Genuinely* smiled at me.

I felt as though my heart was melting as I brushed my fingers over his sharp cheekbones. “Insufferable...” I repeated, more to myself.

“You would miss me if I were not here to be insufferable.” Jesper chuckled, and he slipped his hand into his overcoat, pulling out a small vial. I recognised it immediately and reached for it to take a sip.

“Did you think you were going to get lucky tonight?” I asked him, uncorking the vial and taking a quick sip of the sour liquid. I offered the rest to him so he could do the same. It was known to stop pregnancy, and I had used similar bottles in the past with my brief partners.

His eyes sparkled as he took a sip, not bothering to take the vial back. Instead, he drank it from my hand, and I watched his throat bob. “I had hoped I might. But I did not seek to presume.”

“That surprises me.”

“I would never presume, my sweet. I would rather you tell or show me you want to be with me.” Jesper shook his head, his lips pressing to mine for a moment, the sincerity of his words lingering between us.

“Then let me make it very clear for you, *darling*,” I whispered against his mouth, my breath mingling with his. “I want you inside of me, and I want you *now*.”

“...You don’t need to tell me twice, Kitty Cat.”

Chapter Twenty-Two



I could feel the twigs against my scalp, the discomfort bearable when I felt him grind his hips against mine again, sending a jolt of pleasure through me. I tilted my head back, my crown finally falling from my head and onto the ground – completely forgotten. I stared up at the night sky before my eyes fluttered closed as I felt his length press against my folds.

My eyes shot open again when his hand wrapped around my neck and he growled, “Don’t you dare close your pretty eyes. I want you to look at my face as I bring you pleasure. I want you to see you come undone in my arms, and when you do, you’re going to cry out my name like a good girl. Understand, my sweet?” The praise sent a fire between my legs once more, and I gulped, nodding my head dumbly. I bit my lip hard when he suddenly squeezed my neck. “I can’t hear you.”

“Yes, I understand,” I got out, smiling mischievously. “Whether or not I will follow your words is another thing entirely.”

Jesper’s mouth was on mine again in a fiery kiss, our tongues winding together and his hand wandering. He teased the tip of his length against my folds, and I bit back a moan.

“What a challenge you are, Cat,” he growled. “So controlled and always with something to say.”

“Sounds like you’re not up to the challenge. Unless there’s something you’re going to do about it?” I murmured against his mouth.

I felt him smirk. "I'm going to make you lose all self-control, and the only thing you'll be able to say is my name, *my sweet*," he said before thrusting deep inside of me.

My hands gripped hold of him tightly. I moaned at being filled by the man whose length lived up to the size of him. I relaxed to be capable of taking him fully.

Jesper's hips began to move, and as I grew accustomed to his size, his thrusts became faster.

He was not gentle with his grip, his hand clutching my neck as the other moved to my bud. He rubbed and pinched it between his fingers, and I realised that the only thing keeping me up was his huge body pushed against mine. He pressed me into the hedge with each deep thrust, and my moans filled the night air.

Heat pooled in my stomach as I watched him pull his face back, his eyes dancing with lust as he watched me. It was an intense stare, one that reminded me he was one of the only people that knew my secrets.

It was as though I were baring my soul to the man, and he was lapping it up.

"Not so chatty now, are we, Kitty Cat?" he chuckled against my skin, hot breath fanning over it. I couldn't respond as I felt my release building. "You're so good at taking me, filthy girl."

I ran a hand through his hair before gripping it tightly at the nape of his neck and pulling his lips onto mine. I kissed him aggressively, pouring all my emotions into his mouth as I felt him groan.

He took it as an excuse to move faster, hitting a spot deep inside of me that had me crying out against his mouth.

"You better not stop!" I told him, pulling back for breath.

I felt him smirk as he kissed the corner of my mouth. "I don't intend to, my sweet. I want your legs shaking – your mind on nothing else but the feeling of my cock filling you."

"So full of yourself, aren't you?" I got out, but gasped when Jesper squeezed the hand around my neck, making it hard to breathe. It heightened everything; it was as though I could feel more of him.

Every thrust hit deep inside of me and I felt him rub my bud with his other hand, his lips trailing over my jaw.

It was enough to have me crumbling in his hold. My body tensed as I reached my high, and I clenched my thighs around him to stop him from

moving away. I had never had a release last so long – as though the man was made to make me feel good.

I was not deterred even when he jerked his head back from my hungry kiss, watching me once more. My eyes observed Jesper's face as he closed his eyes and let out a low growl when he reached his own climax. His hot release filled me, and I let out a shaky sigh of satisfaction.

He slowly released my neck and dropped his hand back to my hip to steady his hold.

"That didn't sound much like my name," he joked, slowing his movements, but he was still buried inside of me.

"Maybe next time, Ulara," I teased, pleased when his eyes lit up at the words. It was strange to feel so satisfied by his reactions – to want to see him happy. His lips landed on mine in a gentle kiss. My lips felt bruised from before, and I wondered if they were swollen.

Jesper slowly pulled out, and I felt him set me on my feet. I tried to hide my disappointment at the loss of him as I gripped hold of his strong arms and steadied myself, knees buckling.

"That good, hm?" Jesper smirked and brushed his nose against mine. The man chuckled when I smacked his chest, and I hid my smile in his hair when he leaned his head to whisper in my ear, "Next time, I'm going to have you completely bare and squirming beneath me so I can see every part of your body. I will leave no place untouched – I intend to explore every part of you until we are both completely satisfied."

I flushed at the idea, about to reply when voices were heard nearby. We shared a glance, and the two of us pulled away from one another. Jesper crouched to pick up my crown and placed it carefully back on for me, his hand smoothing over my head as he did so.

"I'll see you in the middle, Kitty Cat." Jesper winked at me and disappeared in case we were seen together in such a compromising position.

I was unable to calm my excited heart, and I went to relieve myself in one of the dark corners of the maze, my heart still pounding in my chest.

Being with Jesper was exciting. And far more intimate than I was expecting.

The voices grew louder, and I brushed my hands over my dress to straighten out the creases. Narim turned the corner, with an unknown

woman at his side. He was holding a wooden torch, his eyes alight. “Your Majesty! Did you get lost?”

“I’m afraid so.” I chuckled quietly.

Lost on purpose, actually. But the man did not need to know that.

“You have a little something in your...” Narim gestured to my dress and I scrambled to pick out the leaves that were sticking out of it. Some were caught on the sleeves, and there were plenty in the skirts of my dress.

My eyes fell on the woman beside him and, as the light flickered over her face, I bit my tongue. Her hair was a beautiful honey blonde and, whilst she was different in every other way, her face had the same sharp features as Jesper’s. It could only be his mother.

She was probably considered very beautiful. Yet, every word Jesper had ever uttered about her made her appear ugly to me.

“Oh, this is—”

“No need.” I waved a hand, and the woman’s wrinkle-free face tightened. I forced a sweet smile onto my face. “I do not want to know who she is, Lord Halle. She is of little significance to me.”

Both of them were speechless, and I was satisfied when the woman’s face twisted into what I thought was loathing.

Narim was quick to cut in before she could speak, “Do you want to come with us? We are finding the exit since the prize for finding the middle has already been won.”

“No – I will still go to the centre but thank you. Enjoy the rest of your evening.”

I went to walk past them but felt my wrist being gripped. I turned and fully expected to have to shout at the woman Jesper despised, but it was Narim that had reached out. “I really am just guiding the lady to the exit, Majesty. I could always come back and accompany you?”

The man was trying his best.

He really wanted to impress me – even knowing I was engaged to be married. I noticed his slicked hair was a mess, and he had ditched his furs, revealing his more southern clothes beneath. He must have been rushing about for he seemed hot and bothered.

“That is quite alright, Lord Halle.” I snatched my hand back, a little more roughly than I meant to. I needed him to get the idea – I was not the right woman for him. I did not mind entertaining a little flirtation, but I felt as though I would lead him on if it continued.

And my mind had no room for any more handsome men. *Jesper was already one too many.*

I turned sharply, my dress swishing as I moved away from them before he could get any other ideas. Seeing Jesper's mother had me itching to see him again – to find out if he knew she was here. To comfort him if he needed it.

Comfort? I was growing soft for the man.

As I turned around the corners, I found my feet were moving faster. I wondered who had reached the centre first.

My fingers felt sore from gripping the bush earlier, and I let out a grunt as pressed my thumb against the tips to soothe them.

“Cat! Come and see!” A voice called me, and I looked up from my cut-up hands to see Posy waving her hand. “Riddel and I found the centre first!”

The cheerful red-head had her arm linked through Riddel's. The two of them stood at the entrance archway to the centre. I found my feet moved without thought, following the women into the centre of the maze.

My eyes widened at first glance at the grand white statue of the three goddesses that stood high above our heads, their gazes cast upon us.

With every step I took, I could feel their stare follow after me. “It's a beautiful statue,” I muttered, more to myself.

“Apparently someone had it commissioned for you, Cat,” Riddel commented, her arm thrown across Posy's shoulders as they stood on the other side of the statues. “That's what Eriel and Willen said, anyway.”

“But my parents were the ones that had the maze built – it must have been them?” In my heart, I hoped that it was true, but I also knew that they would never do anything for me. Especially not with the knowledge that I was not even their blood.

My nails dug into my palms as I thought about it, staring up at the goddess Maylia, who was closest to me. Her short hair framed her face, and her soulless eyes were almost hidden by her hair, yet they felt so real. In her hands, she held a bow that was set up with two arrows that pointed towards me. It was a strange item for the goddess to be holding, but I assumed it was linked to the idea of catching our souls when we died.

Another story I had studied as a girl. Maylia was said to be the one that caught the souls to carry them to the heavens after death.

I must have missed the part when she did so by shooting them to catch them.

Although – how could I have missed such an important detail?

“I heard it was Lord Ulara.” Posy giggled, the sound carrying across the square to me and I made to turn around.

As I did so, something shot past my face. My breath hitched as I stood very still. Whatever it was grazed my cheek and my skin started to sting as I raised my fingers to it, pulling them away to see blood.

I stared at the liquid for a moment, trying to process what had happened.

“Get down, Cat!” I heard the roar of my name but did not see who said it. I was pulled from my daze when a body crashed into mine, and I groaned as my back hit the dirt, a large body over mine – pressing me firmly to the ground.

I stared up at who landed on me. Jesper’s face was paler than usual, his golden eyes searching my face in a wild panic. “Are you alright?” his words came out strained.

“I think this is a bit much for a small scratch, Jesper,” I joked, but they came out as a croak, betraying my nerves. “I’m fine.” My hand brushed over his back, and I gasped as I realised something was poking out on the back of his shoulder.

An arrow.

“Get up, fool!” I gasped, trying to push the heavy man off me so I could look at his wound. For someone who had been shot with an arrow, he seemed calm.

“This is the second time I’ve saved your life,” Jesper teased but groaned as he moved onto his knees, his eyes closing in pain.

“When was the first?” I asked as a distraction. Riddel was staring at the two of us, and I narrowed my eyes. “What are you just doing there? Go and get help!” I roared, furious that both she and Posy had not moved yet.

Riddel gawked at me, and I saw the horror flash across her face as she stared down at her hands. In them, I saw a strange contraption. It looked like a pedal of some kind and had a long string attached to it, and my eyes followed it up to where it was attached to one of the stone goddess’s hands.

She had set the trap off?

Riddel had tried to kill me?

“It’s not what it looks like...” Riddel got out, choked up. The woman was usually so straightforward, and I had never seen her so lost for words. “It wasn’t meant to hit him—”

I narrowed my eyes as fury flared inside of me. Jesper was hurt because of her, and I gave her no chance to reply as I snapped, “Go and get help now. That is an order from your queen.” My eyes travelled back to Jesper as he tugged on my sleeve, trying to answer my previous question.

Did he know Riddel had tried to kill me? He would not have stepped in front of it if he did, surely. It must have been on his orders.

Unless he had been betrayed by her, too.

It was all so confusing.

“I couldn’t let you die, now could I? I don’t want to find out what happens when someone breaks an oath. I saved you before when that asshole Eden Olliea started giving you trouble.” Jesper coughed, his voice becoming hoarse as he gazed up at me. His eyes were trying to focus, and I found myself hoping I never had to see a world without his golden orbs.

I noticed Riddel beginning to rush off as if realising what had transpired. “What happened to Eden? What did you do?” I asked him.

Jesper chuckled low. “Killed him, of course. Lord Olliea was right about that and so were the rumours. Riddel told me what happened that night you were in the corridor, and I went to find the little rodent.”

I’d always known Jesper was dangerous but had not imagined he would go to such lengths. “Did you accidentally kill him?”

“Absolutely not. I went there *to* kill him.” Jesper grunted, and there was a small glint in his eyes. “He deserved it. And that is why my mark changed.” He raised a hand, but it didn’t quite get to his cheek, so he gestured in the general direction with a wince. “My mark changes whenever I kill someone. The magic in me reacts, and the marking shows the number of men I have killed.”

I gasped when more of his weight fell onto me, and I wrapped my arms around his middle to guide him to lay down on his side since he was too heavy for me to keep up alone.

“Why are you telling me this?” I asked him softly. “You should keep that to yourself.”

“I know you’re curious about me. I might have even fooled myself into thinking you would feel more.” Jesper grimaced again as he tried to move out of my hold, but I placed my hand on his chest to keep him down. I

watched his throat bob as he swallowed thickly, his eyelids fluttering for a moment.

The information was not sitting well within me. I'd never expected him to kill anyone for me. He'd known that his mark would change, which had looked incredibly painful the day after too, and that made me uneasy.

He'd risked so much for me already. And now he'd risked his life.

"Just stay still, Ulara," I muttered, looking at the gap in the bushes to see if someone was coming to help.

Then Jesper's low voice had me snapping back around, my head whirling. "*I love you, Cate.*"

Silence fell.

I think my heart even stopped.

They were words I never thought I would hear from anyone. Not from someone who would know the true me and know what I had done.

Well, nearly everything I had done.

Jesper noticed I had not spoken, and he added, "Well, I mean, I love to spend time with you—"

I stopped him by pressing a finger to his soft lips. "Say it again."

"What? That I love to spend time—"

"No. Say you love me again," I whispered. Desperate.

I needed to hear those words again as if they had the power to heal every wound within me.

He grinned lazily; his eyes fluttering closed again. "I'm too tired."

I frowned. "Don't you dare, Jesper. Stay with me now." I even missed him calling me his silly nicknames.

When I shook his good shoulder, the man did not stir, and I felt my blood go cold. He couldn't die.

I wouldn't let someone else die because of me.

Chapter Twenty-Three



Jesper lay in the bed, his shoulder bandaged and his firm chest rising and falling slowly. He was alive. But whoever had tried to kill us would feel pain far worse than they tried to inflict.

I paced at the end of his bed with Arka; the wolf bringing me the company I craved. A comforting source without any of the endless questions.

Eriel had been furious when he found us in the centre and ordered for the place to be searched whilst he checked me over for injuries, despite Jesper laying there unconscious – bleeding out.

The wound, whilst deep, was not enough to kill him. He would have a nasty scar, though.

Better him than me.

No. I didn't mean that.

I was glad not to be hurt, yet my heart ached at seeing him so – still under the covers. The usually active man had never looked so pale, and his golden eyes were not open or shining like normal.

I stared at him when I stopped pacing, my arms folded across my chest as I waited to see if he would wake up.

He'd told me he loved me – the fool. He shouldn't love me; I wasn't worth loving.

Maybe if he died, he would never feel the disappointment of knowing what I had really done.



“You need to eat something, Cat.” Eriel frowned as he looked over my chair, pointing to the uncovered tray that lay on the table in front of me. I could smell garlic and noticed the cook had prepared bread slathered in some kind of garlic butter with a pot of warm stew beside it. I’d already dropped some bits of meat to Arka, who was laying at the side of my chair. He had been miserable since Jesper’s injury.

“I’m not hungry,” I muttered, swallowing thickly as I pushed the tray away from me, almost knocking it off the desk in the process.

For all I know, it might be poisoned. Someone had already tried to kill me once – who was to say someone would not finish the job for them?

Eriel sighed, and I could see him rub his temples out of the corner of my eye. “Riddel is asking for you again.”

“She can keep asking. I’m not going to see her. I heard enough when we were in the maze.” I grunted, clenching my fingers into a fist on the table. I was furious as I thought of what she had said, and it was hard not to play her simple words over again in my mind.

“It wasn’t meant to hit him.”

A day had passed since the birthday events, and Riddel had been placed in the dungeons at my request. She tried to speak to me multiple times, but I could not find time to listen to her lies – she’d already incriminated herself.

Kalline attempted to speak to me on two occasions, but I had not permitted her an audience. I didn’t need another traitor to be revealed to me.

“Could it have been a threat from The Fourth Kingdom?” Eriel tried again, already having asked me a few times if I thought I was wrong. I knew I wasn’t.

Or I couldn’t admit that I was.

The thought of it being The Fourth Kingdom made me tense. I couldn’t even think about it. They had not acted out against any of the kingdoms yet, but as the years went past, we heard more rumours about them. The Fourth Kingdom was still so unknown to us – any explorers that had been sent there never returned.

I shook my head firmly. “No one here is from there. They might be a danger, but they are not dangerous to me *yet*.”

“If you say so. Would you at least come and address the ladies? They are waiting for you in your chambers and have been asking to at least see you.” Eriel placed a gentle hand on my shoulder, and he squeezed, filling me with a sense of familiar comfort.

“Why?”

“Why do they want to see you?” When I nodded, he continued, “They are concerned about you, Cat. Some of them have come to be your friends, haven’t they?”

“I suppose,” I muttered bitterly, despite the way my stomach churned at the word.

How could they call themselves my friends? They didn’t even know me.

Eriel put his hand under my arm and pulled me out of the comfortable seat, the food forgotten. I knew we were alone and so I linked my hand in his slowly, my arm brushing his as we walked. The man did not argue, not that he ever would.

Instead, he pulled me so he could tuck me against his side, he was warm – and it made me even more sure that he was right.

“I’m here, Cat. Even if you don’t want me to be. I’m not going anywhere,” Eriel assured me, and he pressed a gentle kiss to the side of my head. I found that it erased every bad thought – even if it was just for a moment.

“Thank you, Eriel.”

“Anytime, Cat,” he whispered, a smile forming on his face when I glanced up at him. I still couldn’t find it in me to smile back, but I squeezed his hand gently.

This man deserved the world, and I was keeping him from it.

His eyes flickered behind us to where Arka was stalking behind. “Does that thing have to follow us all the time?”

I smirked. “Why? Are you scared of him? He has not growled at you today.”

“He’s a wolf,” he stated, rolling his eyes. “Anyone would be terrified of him. If he growled at me I’d run in the other direction.”

“If you’re a scaredy cat, just say so,” I teased a little half-heartedly.

The man merely snorted, and he gave me another squeeze. “I’m not afraid of anything. Apart from being on the other end of your wrath.”

“And wolves,” I added.

“...And wolves.”

We walked along the dim corridor towards my apartments, and I noticed the door was already thrown open, the sound of chatter echoed out to the hall.

“You can’t say that, Mirana. You’re a bitch! Mind your own business or the goddesses will surely send you to the depths,” Kalline snarled, and I heard a thud and some more shouts that followed the loud noise.

Eriel and I exchanged a look before letting one another go and walking towards the door. The sight was unexpected, and no one noticed us immediately.

Kalline had pinned a smaller Mirana to the floor, her hands clutching her neck tightly as she made to strangle her. Posy was trying to tug Kalline off the woman by the material of her orange gown, but nothing would move Kalline who had a look of determination screwed up on her face.

“Why do I really hope she succeeds?” I grumbled.

Eriel rolled his eyes at my words, though his lips twitched, and he strode into the room and yelled, “Is this any way to behave in front of Her Majesty, ladies!”

Mirana let out a loud gasp for air when Kalline let go after another moment. Darlia rushed to Mirana’s side and tried to help her up, but she smacked her hands away as she began to sob embarrassingly in a heap on the floor.

“Your Majesty, you should have that wild woman arrested! No lady should act like that!” Darlia demanded as she straightened up, her cool gaze meeting mine. “My sister was attacked unjustly.”

Kalline snorted from where Posy had guided her to a chair – with no injuries I could see. “She deserved it.”

I raised a hand to stop them both from speaking again. They fell into silence and waited for my response. “Let us all have a drink, and we can talk this through.”

Mirana sniffed, and she let Eriel help her onto the chaise, while the other women took some of the unoccupied seats. Willen entered, looking puffed out, his eyes darting between us all. “I heard... screaming...”

“You’re a little bit late, brother.” Eriel sighed, running a hand through his messy curls.

I glared at the man. “I thought you had already started your journey, Sir Swan?”

My words were cold, and I could see the flash of hurt on Willen’s face. “No, Majesty. I thought you would need some support after what happened...”

“Well, if you had been around last night, you might have prevented such a thing,” I snapped harshly.

Willen scratched his stubbled chin nervously. “I apologise. I was readying myself for my journey as you asked.”

“She’s just worried, brother, do not take offence.” Eriel patted his shoulder.

I strolled to sit in my usual seat, which was closest to the unlit fireplace, and Arka settled at my side – his head resting in my lap so that I could run my fingers through his fur as the silence continued. I could hear movement, which I assumed was Eriel filling the glasses with wine, his boots shuffling about the room until he cleared his throat and handed me mine.

I stared at the liquid but did not take a sip. “So, tell me what happened, ladies. Starting with you, Posy.”

Posy was surprisingly solemn, and I assumed it was because of Riddel. She had seen everything as I had. I couldn’t imagine why Posy still wanted to defend the woman. She shuffled a bit in her seat, her eyes not meeting mine. “Mirana called Riddel a traitorous whore, so Kalline went to defend her sister.”

“Ah,” I answered thoughtfully.

“And that’s just not a nice word, and even if Riddel has a reputation, she doesn’t have to be so unkind. Riddel hasn’t done anything, and her innocence will be confirmed, eventually. She’s a good woman. I know she is.” Posy was firm, and my eyes widened.

I hadn't expected her to speak out against my judgement. She was also surprised at herself as she quickly downed her wine to hide her nerves.

"You seem to have a very strong opinion about this. You were there, Posy, you heard what Riddel said. She must be guilty."

"But... but what if Riddel just meant that the arrow was meant to hit you because that is what the perpetrator intended!" Posy leaned forward desperately. "She was just in shock – her closest friend had been hit."

It took me a moment, but I glared at the girl, my anger boiling inside of me. She was just another person that would not be on my side after making me the promise of being my friend. "I thought better of you, Posy, but if you will defend a traitor over your queen, then perhaps I will have to re-think your place here."

Posy's round eyes went wide, and I saw unshed tears glisten in them. "No, please, Cat. I was just defending someone I treasure dearly–"

"Am I not someone you treasure?" I glowered at her, watching her cower in her seat. Eriel placed a warning hand on my shoulder, but I shook it off. "Do I not deserve the same defence?"

"I was just guarding your honour, My Queen," Mirana whined from her seat, where Darlia was rubbing her back gently. That was the most caring I'd ever seen the woman.

"I can fight my own battles, thank you, Mirana," I clipped, kicking my leg so that it was crossed over the other one. I tried to calm myself down, ignoring the way Posy started to cry, despite the pang in my chest that told me I was being unfair. "And Kalline, what do you have to say about attacking someone, hm?"

"She dishonoured my *innocent* sister. I had to deal with her to protect my family's honour." Kalline was just as haughty as I was and she stared me down, her vibrant eyes not leaving my face.

She was a spy – she had to have been a spy this entire time, just like her sister.

Eriel cleared his throat and spoke before anyone else could, "You would all do well to remember that these are Her Majesty's apartments, and you should not be fighting within them. What the queen has deigned true will be respected–"

I couldn't have him defending Mirana, which is the path I feared he was going down. "No, no, Kalline was correct to defend herself – Mirana spoke out of turn."

The room was puzzled by my sudden change in side.

I gazed up at Eriel to note he was pretending to cough to cover up his surprise. "Quite so, My Queen. How do you wish me to punish her, then?"

Mirana's soft whispers could be heard since the room was so quiet. "They are making fun of me, sister."

She made it so easy to dislike her. I placed my glass down on the table beside Posy and rose from my seat. I could feel their eyes on me as I approached the woman and clicked my tongue, making Mirana's head snap up.

For a moment, there was a flicker of distaste in her grey eyes, but it vanished before I could decide if I'd imagined it.

"They are making fun of you because you are pathetic, Mirana. Has no one ever told you that before?" I could feel my temper rising again. "If you believe something, you should state why you believe it, and you should be willing to hear other opinions—"

"What, like you, *Majesty*?" She spat the word out with a venom I had not heard from her before, the word making her face twist in an ugly manner. It was the same face I had seen in the mirror on occasion.

I was no better than her. *She was right.*

My mouth opened to speak when there was a choking sound behind me, and I turned to see Posy clutching her throat. Her rosy cheeks were fading, and she began to panic, swaying. Eriel and I exchanged a glance before we both rushed to her, Eriel catching her before she could fall off her seat onto the rug.

"C-Cat," Posy got out, her bright voice no longer. Instead, it was replaced with a scratchy sound, and she choked again. She began to foam at the mouth, and I cupped her pale cheeks in my hands as I searched her eyes.

"Don't talk, Posy, you're going to be alright," I assured her, not knowing who Eriel had told to go and fetch a physician since my focus was on the struggling woman.

I stroked her hair out of her eyes, her coughs wracking her chest, and she whimpered. "I'm scared," she got out, the words mumbled.

"You have nothing to be scared of, sweet Posy. You're in safe hands. I'm here. I'm not going anywhere. The goddesses are watching over you," I whispered, stroking her cheek. Her face relaxed slightly at the soothing words.

“Willen! Go and get help!” I shrieked, not looking in his direction. I wasn’t even sure if he was still there.

Eriel was holding her head in his lap after kneeling, his hand reaching to the table where both glasses had been drained. “She must have had your wine, Cat,” he told me, his brown eyes filled with worry. “I think she must have been poisoned.”

I looked back down at the woman. Her chokes had stopped. The room was silent. No one dared to move.

Her body was limp as Eriel adjusted his hold on her, his hand moving to check her pulse. I didn’t need to see him shake his head to know the answer.

“I’m so sorry...” I whispered to the lifeless woman. A woman so full of life looked so still. So faint.

I let someone die again. I’d lost someone else. *It was my fault.*

Chapter Twenty-Four



“My sweet?” I almost fell at the side of the bed when I walked into my chambers, seeing Jesper propped up against the pillows. “What’s going on? Why are your cheeks so wet? Have you been crying for me?” He grinned but held out his arm, his fingers beckoning me.

That golden gaze meant so much to me after all that happened the previous evening.

I’d not slept all night, and Eriel refused to leave my side after the second attempt on my life in such a short space of time.

I didn’t care about any of that. A girl had died in my arms. Another friend.

I had been so cruel to her before as well.

The thought spurred me towards the bed, and I almost tripped over the end of my black gown. I felt the bed dip as I knelt on it and threw my arms around Jesper's shoulders.

Jesper grunted, and his strong arms found their way around my waist, and I could feel the vibrations of his laugh run through my body. “Now, what has brought this on, Kitty Cat? You want to thank me for being your hero?”

“So many questions for someone who nearly decided to die the other night,” I grumbled against his shoulder, burying my face there and taking in his citrus scent, letting it wash over me.

Jesper brushed a hand over my head and down my back, grunting when my arm nudged his wound. “Be careful.” He tutted, pulling back enough that our faces were close together. He let his hand stroke my cheek, and I leaned into his warmth, closing my eyes for a moment. “What a beautiful sight...” he hummed, more to himself than to me.

“I have... so much to tell you,” I told him. I had missed confiding in the man. It was so easy to talk to him normally, but I could already tell that it was going to be a difficult conversation.

I wasn't even sure where to begin.

Jesper pulled me back to his chest when I went to move, and he kept his arms around me. I narrowed my eyes. “Are you really injured?”

My fiancé huffed in amusement, blowing his bangs out of his face in the process. “How dare you insult an injured man!” Jesper teased and pinched my cheek. I squeaked and moved my hand to rub the pain that he left there. “Come on then, my sweet, give me all the new information.”

I dropped my hand as I thought over what I had to tell him, my hands resting on his chest, fingers tangled in the material of his white night shirt. “Riddel... is in custody.”

I felt him tense under my hands, and I kept my eyes trained on his chest, where the shirt did not cover his collarbones. Before he could speak, I continued, “And Posy, one of my ladies—”

“I know who she is.” His voice was deadly, but he did not interrupt.

I swallowed, feeling the burn in my throat, but standing my ground. I would explain myself to him. I would try and rectify the situation. “She drank poison that was intended for me, and she... s-she died in my arms, Jesper,” I whispered the last part, unable to process the words.

My mind had tricked me into thinking I'd become accustomed to death, but I hadn't. I was just like any other person, and I knew that I would have to live with what I had done – another thing that would burden me forever.

Once I had started, I couldn't seem to stop. “I saw Riddel holding the contraption that set off the arrow. The guards checked it, and there was no one else that could have set it off aside from her.” His eyes burned into the top of my head, but he did not stop me. “So, I had her locked up to protect myself. I didn't think about if someone else might have set it up and she triggered it by accident, and I didn't wait to ask. I thought I *knew*.”

“I see.”

“I should have listened to her, but I didn’t want to because I thought I knew best. Posy died because she felt she had to drink her sorrows away, and if she hadn’t been so distraught, she would have never touched the poisoned wine – and I would have died instead, just as I was meant to.”

I didn’t realise that my hands had tightened on his shirt. Or the way that my breathing had become laboured, and that my eyes were starting to sting. My throat was constricting. I felt his fingers slowly tuck themselves under my chin, and he tilted my head up to him, his stare intense.

“I killed *her*,” I whimpered.

“No, you didn’t kill Posy, my sweet.” Jesper shook his head confidently.

A puff of air left my lips. My body rejected the idea of me saying the words, but I finally let them leave my lips. Even Eriel had never heard me admit such a thing. “Not her. I killed Catania.”

His eyebrow rose and his eyes never left mine, assessing me. “How?” There was no judgment in his stare, which made it easier for the story to spill from my mouth, wanting someone to know exactly what I had done. Then I would have no more secrets.

My secrets were causing me to be someone horrible – someone who abused the people around her.

“Catania was ill – everyone knew it. But they thought she would get better. Or that it would be manageable as she got older, but Catania knew differently. She was the one that had to feel the pain every day, and she knew... she knew she would never get better.” I paused, her name feeling wrong on my lips after claiming it as my own.

“What was wrong with her?”

I was grateful for the questions. It kept me on track. “She had heart problems – she was born early, and her body was weak. She was given so many medicines, but she spent so many days in bed, on her own. And then there was the accident.”

I closed my eyes as I recalled that day.

I followed Catania, my hand reaching out to grab a hold of hers as we always would have done.

She snatched her hand back with a disgusted look on her face. “Know your place – keep behind me.”

My eyes widened at her blunt response.

Things had been changing with Catania over the past few months since her birthday. Her health seemed to be improving, and her parents had been

thrilled as it meant they had less use for me.

“But...” I felt my lip wobble.

“Oh, grow up, Cate. In fact, you should just go back to your room; you will not be needed this evening. You know Mama and Papa do not want you there.”

“It’s Mother’s birthday. I should be there to celebrate...”

“You’re just my shadow – no one will even know you exist, Cate. You know that, don’t you?” Catania had hissed as she turned to me where she stood at the top of the staircase that led down to where our parents were waiting, her hands on her hips.

It was meant to be a special occasion. The two of us were rarely seen walking around together – let alone with our parents. Catania was known as the ‘sick Princess of Crimone’ and it was rare to get a sighting of her.

I was not even a thought – my existence was only known by a few. She was right about that.

“Why are saying such nasty things, Catania?” I sniffed as I felt the tears forming. She was never usually so cruel to me.

“That’s what Mama and Papa told me. I am to think of you like that. You’re not even my real sister,” she scoffed, the image of her twisted smile so horrible.

“You never used to be like this – what happened? Did I do something wrong?” I asked her, my hands shaking at my sides. I could still remember the heartbreak from that moment, the way I had been betrayed by someone who had been closest to me.

I didn’t understand what she meant at the time – about not being her real sister. I thought she was just saying it to be mean, but she had known about my true birth before I had.

Catania pointed her finger at me. “You’re pathetic, Cate. It would have been better if you were never born. When I’m queen, I’ll have to find a way to get rid of you. That’s what Mama and Papa said. You should get used to living in the shadows for the rest of your life if you don’t want to be killed.”

“I’m not a threat to you! I don’t want the crown, Catania.” I stepped forward with my hands outstretched to take a hold of hers, but she placed her hands on my shoulders and pushed me backwards. “I don’t understand...”

I stumbled, nearly tripping on the hem of my long dress. A hand-me-down from her.

“You’re healthy! You’re not the one they keep looking at like a piece of glass that might break at any moment.”

“You can’t help being sick, just as I can’t help being well,” I argued, my anger rising. “You’re getting better, that’s what the physician said, isn’t it?”

“No! I’m never going to get better – never! No matter how much money everyone wastes on physicians and medicines, I will never get better. I know that and everyone else should accept it – I’m going to die young.”

“That can’t be true,” I whispered, shocked.

She snorted, grabbing the front of my gown to tug me towards her so our noses were almost bushing as she spoke. “I hate you.”

“You never used to. We were friends, Catania.”

“I just saw the light finally. Mama and Papa were right about you. You suck the life out of everything around you – including me. Maybe I would be well if you weren’t so awful, the goddesses are probably punishing me for being friends with you.”

My eyes widened at her logic – which there was a lack of. “You’re insane. I think it is me who is being punished–”

She shoved me again, and this time I reacted by gripping her arms, the two of us struggling to leave a mark or make the other one hurt. The movements were fast, and I felt my behind hit the ground as she tackled me to the floor.

For a brief moment I thought about her heart, her weak and frail heart, and how she was the one overexerting herself. I didn’t have it in me to care further when she landed a resounding slap across my cheek. It stung, and I could hardly swallow before she repeated the action, making me groan.

Thinking she had won, she turned away from me towards the stairs. My hand shot out and tangled in her hair, and I tugged it hard, hearing her yelp in pain. Her nails dug into my skin as she held onto me, the pain shooting up my arm, but it was nothing I was not used to.

*“I’m going to kill you!” Catania screamed, and I wondered if it would alert anyone to come and find us. If it did, I would surely be punished for **our** behaviour.*

“Go on then! At least I wouldn’t have to see you ever again!” I yelled back and dropped my hand from her hair.

Her eyes were full of hatred at that moment. I'd never seen her so enraged, and she was the mirror image of her parents then. I knew there was no going back to how we were before – whatever lies they had filled her heart with had finally poisoned her against me.

She ran towards me, and out of instinct, I pushed her backwards. This only angered her further, and she repeated her action, but I moved out of her way.

I didn't even have time to turn to see what had happened as she let out a blood-curdling scream before there was a loud thud.

When I did turn to see what had happened, she was in an unmoving heap at the bottom of the staircase, her blood staining the bottom step.

“When our parents found her, they made the painful decision that I would take her place. I'd always been the spare child in case something happened to Catania. I would be her until I died – it was my curse for what I'd done, and I regret it every day,” I spoke quietly, my voice barely rising above a whisper. “They could not accept the thought of not having an heir, and their insistence we stay locked away worked in their favour. No one outside of a certain few members of staff knew what Catania looked like, and even if they had caught a glimpse, we looked enough alike.”

I rambled towards the end and did not realise that my lip had started to tremble.

Jesper brushed his thumb over my chin, and he spoke low, “I do not think you are in the wrong. She was the one that made the mistake...”

“But if we hadn't fought–”

“If *she* hadn't fought. She was the one who started it, all you did was protect yourself, Cate,” Jesper told me, shaking his head.

“I'm going crazy, Jesper,” I started to sob, “I hear so many voices all the time – I'm so scared that the people I hold dear are going to betray me. I don't know how to cope with any of this. I feel so alone.”

“You're not alone, Cate. You've got me.”

“I've got you,” I repeated, burying my face in his chest, feeling his warmth envelop me. “I've got you.”

And that was how we stayed for some time, the man who I thought I despised, cradling me to his chest and soothing me despite all I had done. Even though I did not deserve any of it.

I wondered if he would ask me more. It would not surprise me if the man continued to ask me questions and get every single piece of

information he could out of me, as he had done with many other things.

When I eventually calmed down, I heard him ask, “What happened in those years before you became queen? It was, what, ten years?”

It took me a moment to work it out myself, before I nodded. “They rushed to teach me everything I’d missed out on. Eriel and Willen came along around that time, and they helped to train me too – that’s how we became close.”

Jesper face settled in understanding and he brushed his hand up and down my back soothingly. We fell into silence again for a while, the two of us relishing in being close.

“Now, I do not wish to rush you, but have you decided to free Riddel?”

I sniffed and shook my head. “Not yet.”

“I suppose that is a wise choice. She has not been proven innocent,” Jesper muttered, and he brushed his lips against my brow gently, his hands stroking up and down my sides.

I slowly pushed myself away from his chest and off the bed. “No, I judged her too soon without hearing what she had to say. She also could not have poisoned me if she was in prison. I will go and free her myself, I’ll go now and bring her to you. She will want to see you and I... will have to tell her about Posy.”

His warm hand caught mine, and he tugged me before I could get too far. “Thank you, Cate. For telling me everything. Even if you can’t say the words I want to hear, I am grateful to have gained your trust.”

I flushed. *I didn’t think he would remember that he said he loved me.*

That would have to wait for now. I had some apologising to do – and it dawned on me I’d forgotten to tell him something else. “Oh, and your mother is here.”

Chapter Twenty-Five



I longed to shut myself away in the chapel. I wanted time to paint and be alone with my thoughts and the goddesses, but that would not be. I strode with purpose towards the stairs that led down to the dungeons, across the courtyard. No one looked in my direction.

You are their queen – they should respect you.

That shouldn't matter to me anymore. I didn't need their respect.

Jesper had been more unimpressed with the news of his mother being at Henvale than with my imprisonment of his friend or the news of my past. He asked a lot of questions that I couldn't answer, but I agreed to send Eriel and Narim to him to investigate why she was there. He turned his nose up at being assisted by the two men but had not argued... much.

People and their egos.

My feet hit the stone faster as I increased my speed, and my hands curled into fists at my sides.

I didn't want to admit I was wrong – but I was. I had imprisoned Riddel out of nothing more than pure fear, and I'd not given her the chance to plead her case.

The guards unlocked the door that led further down into the depths of the castle, and I almost fell as I ran down the winding staircase. The air became stifling, and I could no longer see the daylight from outside of the windows.

It was truly the darkest part of the castle, and I had put so many in here without reason. Well, I'd had a reason at the time, but I was beginning to see why that was not right. I never usually took time to inspect the place – but after recent events, I was beginning to see it in a new light.

As I came out to the first row of cells, I heard the drips, the silence that was eerie in comparison to the noise I had expected. There was some clinking of chains as I walked past the cells, searching for the raven-haired woman.

I frowned, beginning to realise most of the cells were empty. I avoided a wet patch on the stones and held my gown higher, revealing my petticoats. The stale air grew thicker, and I raised my wrist up to my nose, taking in the scent of the floral perfume I'd applied this morning.

Every cell was empty, until I reached the end of the row, about to turn the corner and go down another dimly lit route. The torch flickered and a clang against the bars almost made me jump out of my skin.

"Oi! Is you the queen? You're pretty ugly." The lone man cackled, holding onto the bars with his dirty fingers. I came to a stop and glanced to the side where he was.

"You have my attention. Where is everyone?" I asked him, my voice echoing.

The man clicked his tongue, revealing his yellowing teeth, and I bit back a remark. *He wanted to call me ugly?* "They've been moved – someone came and got 'em earlier. Said it was 'er Majesty's orders." He let out a manic laugh, and I stood up straighter.

"Who did? I demand you tell me."

"Ye could at least offer me some coins, Yer Majesty," the man grumbled, but he leaned his face up against the bars, his dark eyes glistening. "Or let me out."

I narrowed my eyes and took a step closer. "I don't know what you've done. I can't just let you out." My spine tingled as I sensed movement behind me, my fingers gripping the sword at my waist. I never usually went anywhere without some form of protection.

"I didn't do nothin' wrong." He grinned. "Other than support my mistress," the man drawled, and he pushed back from the cell, easily undoing the lock and stepping out. I blinked, watching his every move as he slammed the door shut with a resounding clang.

I started to unsheathe my sword. “And who is your mistress?” Hundreds of names flashed through my mind, and I feared I would turn around and see someone I was not expecting. Could it be Jesper’s mother? Her husband was working in the mutations, and it would make sense if it was her.

A hand came to rest on my shoulder, and I tensed, their hand sliding down my arm to push the sword back into the sheath. I wondered if my guards were still at the door leading into the dungeons or if they had been bribed too. It would not shock me.

The man smirked, and he disarmed me with ease, his breath fanning over my face, and my nose scrunched up at the putrid smell that left him. Rotting eggs was all I could think of.

“My lady.” He bowed his head, and for a split second, I thought he was talking to me, but his bleary eyes were hovering over my shoulder.

“Are you surprised yet, Catania?” a voice droned, and I frowned, turning quickly to come face to face with the person.

Mirana.

How... disappointing?

She had her hair pinned up tightly on her head, pulling her hair from her face and making her look sharp and neat. She stared up at me, rising onto the tips of her toes, which prevented her from being intimidating.

I sighed heavily, indifferent to her. “Not really, Mirana. Now what did you do? Are you so desperate for some attention that you have resorted to freeing my prisoners? How utterly tiring. Could you not have thought of something more original?”

Mirana’s smile faltered as I sounded bored with her, not playing into the scene she must have planned out. “I... I had to do something! You are destroying my family, and I will not let you get away with it.”

I clicked my tongue and leaned down to her, my chin jutting out. “Did you try to kill me, too? Is that what the poison was about? Are you proud of yourself for killing Posy?” I growled, my lips pulling back cruelly.

Mirana’s eyes widened, and she shook her head quickly. “No! I didn’t kill Posy, that wasn’t me. They didn’t run that idea past me, but it was me in the maze.”

Someone else was trying to kill me too? It just couldn’t get any better.

I raised an eyebrow. “And you did it to frame Riddel?”

Mirana caught hold of the puffed sleeve of my dress, tugging it so that I would have to pull my face down to her. Her small face was screwed up. "I did it to kill you, but that stupid demon got in the way. It's a shame he didn't die though – all he does is get in the way."

I stepped forward until she had to move backwards, my toes stepping on hers. She yelped in surprise, and I smiled coolly.

"You're lucky he didn't die," I told her, continuing to back her up until she hit another cell door. "If he had, I would have slit your throat as you slept. Or perhaps I would have had you dragged off and drowned." Her grey eyes were wide with fear. "Come to think of it, I would have hauled you right back to the centre of that maze and used your contraption and watched you bleed out, slowly, painfully, whilst begging for your life."

The woman's eyes filled with tears, yet it felt exhilarating to threaten her. I could not feel remorse for it. It was a power I'd not had as a child.

I was beginning to realise just how much influence I had and how no one could walk all over me or those I held dear.

Mirana shook as she tried to push me back, but I was unmoving. "You're a monster–"

"Possibly." I chuckled mercilessly, my hand knocking her grip off me. "But I'm willing to embrace it to protect those I lo – care for."

There was a man that deserved to hear those words first.

A man who had made me an oath that would kill him so easily and gave me nothing but support.

I grunted when an arm came from behind me and wrapped around my neck, effectively pulling me into their chest. The same stink from before shrouded me, and I tried to kick the man from the cell in between the legs. "Need your lackey to do the dirty work because you can't handle me yourself, Mirana?" I taunted.

Mirana brushed herself off, glaring at me. "You're quite mouthy for someone who won't be making it out of here alive."

"I wouldn't be so sure about that, you see, I've been in far worse messes than this one." I shrugged, hissing through my teeth when I felt a blade press up against my lower back.

"You'll die a pathetic death, Your Majesty. And when you are gone, the council will no longer let a ruler sit on the throne. My father will gain his rightful place back – he will be revered just as he was meant to be,"

Mirana said, revealing her own knife from where it was hidden under her skirts in her garter, and the blade glinted in the torchlight.

I was not afraid of death. But leaving Crimone in their hands was not an option. Even if the throne was never meant to be mine, I could not let mutators take over and put people at risk.

The three of us were startled when the door I had entered through crashed open, and a shadowy figure raced towards us. None of us had a chance to react as Mirana let out a yelp, a low growl leaving the furry figure.

The man behind me stumbled and fell with a thud as an arrow flew into his face. The target hit.

He gurgled and fell into a heap, his bones cracking against the hard floor. His screams were easy to drown out as I watched my saviour.

“Arka...” I mumbled, looking back to the gate whilst Mirana screamed in pain as Arka tugged at her dress, ripping it with his sharp teeth. *Would Jesper follow him?*

Instead, I caught sight of Eriel, a look of thunder across his handsome face as he threw the bow he used over his body, and grabbed his bloodstained sword from the floor.

“We seem to have a little problem, Cat,” he said, looking over his shoulder when there came thuds down the stone steps, raising his sword – only for Kalline to rush in.

Her golden skirts were ripped, and she revealed long, smooth legs that anyone would be envious of. She was glowing with sweat, but the wild smile that formed on her face was the happiest I’d seen her, aside from when she was creating dresses.

“I solved the problem, don’t worry.” Kalline smirked, walking over to rest her arm on Eriel’s shoulder as she wiped her brow. I’d never spotted it before, but she towered over Eriel, too. “We need to get moving. I killed most of them and managed to get Jesper outside of the gates.”

“Where are the prisoners? Did you find them? Riddel? My pare– well, you know who?” I asked quickly as I moved to join them. I could hear Mirana’s cries as Arka dealt with her, the slashing of material and then more sobs. I wondered, for a split second, if it was her pale skin he was tearing.

Eriel nodded, his hand taking mine as he began to pull me with him. “They’re safe. The other prisoners were moved further down – I used the

other entrance, where the physician would come and go after seeing your... them."

"Riddel is waiting for us with Jesper," Kalline added, moving to wait on the steps. "What would you like us to do next, Cat?"

"We'll travel to the north ourselves. Someone in the castle is trying to kill me, and it's not safe for me to stay." *Not safe for anyone close to me, either.*

Kalline bowed. "I'll go and gather some supplies for the journey." She started to run up the stairs, the remnants of her dress shimmering as she moved.

Eriel tugged me again, but I hesitated, turning to look over my shoulder and shaking his grip off me.

"Arka!" I called, ignoring the way Eriel said my name as I stepped towards Mirana, who was in a bundle on the floor. I could see her shaking under what remained of her dress and cloak.

The excited wolf ran over to my side when he heard his name and curled around my frame, nudging his head against my hand. I gave him a gentle pat, and watched the woman turn paler when she saw her man on the floor in a puddle of his own blood. She stayed on her knees as she looked up at me.

Her cheeks were stained with tears, and I saw a genuine fear in her eyes. "Spare me, Your Majesty, please."

I leaned down to her, my hand catching onto her chin, and I dug my nails in. She whimpered at my touch. "Tell me who killed Posy and I might think about pardoning you." *Unlikely.*

The woman trembled, but she suddenly stopped. Then a wicked smile passed across her face. "Someone you trust has betrayed you; I'd keep an eye on everyone if I were you," she hissed, jolting her chin so that I had to free her, and she bit down on my fingers.

"Cat!" I heard Eriel's voice call.

The pain ran through my body, and I yelled, my other hand coming down onto her cheek so hard that she went flying to the ground. I cradled my bloodied fingers but shook my head when Eriel tried to come forward.

"You stupid bitch," I snarled, and drew my sword with the other hand, moving to press my foot on her stomach to turn her onto her back. "You could have saved yourself."

“I know you would never have spared me,” she grunted, eyeing the sword in my hand.

“Well, you’re right about one thing at least,” I snapped.

Mirana glared at me before closing her eyes tightly when she saw me raise the sword higher, aiming for her chest. “I hope the goddesses punish you for this,” she muttered.

“They won’t punish me, Mirana. I was chosen by the goddesses to rule Crimone. I am divine in comparison to your pathetic life. You will rot for what you have done. No one touches my ladies and gets away with it.”

And then I brought the sword down.



“You told me Jesper was here.” I frowned as we rode towards the gates. “So why am I not seeing him?”

“Perhaps you need your eyes tested, Cat?” Kalline quipped, to which I narrowed my eyes at her.

Eriel sighed, disregarding the comment. “I thought he was going to come and wait here, but I don’t think the lord likes to listen to orders,” he grumbled, muttering something rude under his breath about the man that would have made me laugh at any other time.

“I’m not going without him,” I said, turning to Riddel, who was silently staring at the castle gates. Her knuckles white as she gripped the reins. I cleared my throat and moved Joy towards the woman and came to a stop beside her. “Riddel, I...”

“You’re sorry,” she cut me off, “I know.”

“Would you let me say it?”

“No.” She would not meet my eyes, her lilac ones not wavering. “I’m not ready for that yet.”

It was not my place to force her to accept my words. I didn't deserve her forgiveness. "Then I will not. Did you see Jesper before you came outside?"

Riddel's hair was tied up with a red ribbon, her skin still smudged with dirt from the cells, and I ached to say sorry again – but didn't push it. I would have time to beg for her forgiveness when this was all over. She answered honestly, "No, he must have gone back to look for you."

His stupid oath again. I debated whether to rush in after him as well, but Kalline said his name and we all watched him storm through the gates, his clothes covered in blood. Jesper's golden eyes were crazed as he stared up at me, his mark beginning to burn his skin, and my lips parted in shock as it began to form a new shape.

"It's–"

"Changing because I killed a few people, yes, my sweet," Jesper answered – his voice lacking humour.

I watched as he approached Joy, and he swung himself up behind me, placing his hands on my arms when he was settled, and I'd made room for him.

The magic behind his mark still confused me, but I dared not ask at that moment.

I didn't miss the wince he gave either. his wound was still not completely healed after all.

Eriel narrowed his eyes at him. "Who did you kill, Jesperin?"

First name basis? I was impressed Eriel was not holding his grudge in the situation.

"The men that had been sent to Her Majesty's chambers, thinking that it was her in there and not me. Clearly, someone believed she would be in there. They must have thought the poison had worked," Jesper replied. It was a shock to see him so concentrated – he did not seem to be in a joking mood. Had the arrow struck it all out of him?

"Why didn't you just knock them out?" Eriel asked, incredulous.

I could feel Jesper's chest vibrate with laughter. "There's no fun to be had in knocking people out."

It turns out even an arrow through the shoulder wouldn't be able to get rid of his sense of humour.

Riddel turned her horse around and began to lead the way, with Kalline catching her up.

It was going to be a long journey to the north, and I just had to hope that what was waiting for us would not be an ambush. Willen would have been well ahead of us by now, yet we still had not heard anything. *I feared that perhaps we had lost him.*

Jesper's hand brushed across my stomach, and I squirmed at his touch.

"Just don't say anything." I huffed, staring at my bandaged fingers. *The little bitch really had tried to bite them off.*

Jesper smirked, and he held his hands up in defence. "I wasn't going to."

"You've always got something to say, darling." I rolled my eyes and adjusted in the saddle, feeling his arms tighten around me. "Remind me again why the two of us are riding together?"

"I need the support. I'm weak after saving your life, remember?" he teased, his nose nuzzling just below my ear, and I let out a satisfied sigh. Even with the situation as it was, I could not deny how calm I felt in his arms.

I'd have to find a good time to tell him about my realisation too.

We were quiet as we travelled, and I began to appreciate how much had happened in the space of a few hours. There was so much to comprehend, and my head was pounding as the events caught up with me.

As much as I wanted to stay awake and see every village we passed through, I dozed off.

But my snooze did not last too long as I heard voices and could not feel us moving anymore.

My eyes cracked open, and I noticed the sky was getting darker. No longer was the sky grey, but it had been replaced with a cloudy night – with only a few stars shining.

We would have to stop and make a camp soon.

There was a voice that was familiar to me, and I sat up straighter, my limbs stiff. I felt Jesper's arm tighten around me as I shifted and looked to the side where the sound was coming from.

I realised it was the hooded figure from the night in the art room.

Apart from, they were no longer hooded.

And she was the woman from all my paintings.

Chapter Twenty-Six



The woman bowed her head respectfully to me, and I felt my throat tighten. It was as though I was looking into one of my canvases... the final touches of the face I had never been able to get right coming together. “Your Majesty.”

“Meet Elizabetia,” Jesper introduced. “In fact, you’re probably quite a big fan, aren’t you?” he teased. “Since you dressed as her that night we met.”

Elizabetia Murcla?

“Jesper, don’t make fun of Her Majesty.” Elizabetia shook her head firmly, and she gave me a warm smile that lit up her whole face. “It is an honour, My Queen.”

“I... Jesper!” I snapped angrily, elbowing him hard in the stomach, enough to make the man groan loudly. Jesper pulled his arm back to rub where I had hit. I ignored the woman for the moment. “You saw my paintings! You knew the entire time that she was real.”

“I did, but I couldn’t reveal who Elizabetia was. Not until now.” His silver bangs fell in front of his pained eyes as I tilted my head up to him. “And I couldn’t reveal about your parentage. But it seems like we have no choice now—”

“That didn’t stop you from telling me I was adopted,” I hissed at him. “I’m not stupid. I can tell that she’s my mother.”

An odd feeling settled in my stomach as I said the words, and my eyes traced over the woman's face as I looked back at her.

I could see the signs of age on her face, but otherwise, it was no different from my own. I must have taken after her. She wore the same cloak from the night in the chapel, but her belt was weighed down with weapons, and a bow wrapped around her form with her quiver of arrows on her back.

"Would you...allow me to explain myself?" Elizabetia said cautiously, staring back as if she were trying to study me too.

I merely nodded, not trusting myself to speak. So much had already happened, and I had not expected to meet my *true* mother as well.

The path we were travelling on began to turn into one of the forests and I glanced around us. The breeze was cool, but not unpleasant, and the leaves blew, rustling.

My head still felt like it wanted to burst with all the new information, and I waved a hand to signal that I needed to stop. I gave no one a chance to ask what was wrong before dismounting.

"Where are you going, my sweet?" Jesper asked with a deep frown, his eyebrows furrowed.

I didn't answer, instead, I hoisted my skirts and ran into the trees – just far enough that I felt surrounded by nature.

And then I screamed.

The sound resonated around me, and I tightened my hands into fists and pushed the sound out further. I stomped my feet hard in the dirt and felt like tugging my hair out.

Yet, it felt good to get the sound out.

Mirana was dead. Someone close to me was working against me. And we still had no news from Willen about the mutation den or the cure.

I didn't care what the others thought – it was too much to think about their feelings as well as my own. If they were overwhelmed, they were not showing it, but I could not continue the journey the way I was.

With my throat suitably sore, I started to head back, stepping over a few roots and moving to mount Joy again.

No one questioned me and I was glad for it. Jesper's hold tightened as he kept his hands on the reins. He silently handed me the flask filled with water, and I gratefully took it, soothing my throat.

Feeling lighter, I turned my head back to Elizabetia. “You can tell me now. The truth this time – not the story you spouted that night you came to see me.”

“You went to see her? You didn’t tell me that,” Jesper grumbled, offended, and he let his chin rest on top of my head. I felt enveloped by the man, his citrus scent wrapped around me, and I found I did not mind at all.

Elizabetia looked sheepish but ignored Jesper. “You were right, Majesty. I am your mother, and I was honest when I told you I gave you up to the royal family.” Her face screwed up in agony as she looked away. “I thought I was doing the right thing at the time. I was a wanted criminal for what I had done—”

“My grandfather?”

She nodded gravely. “They thought I had killed him – although it was an accident. No one would have believed the word of a woman who steals and gives to those who need it.”

Eriel called to us from behind, where he was riding at the rear. “What happened to the king?”

Elizabetia sighed heavily. “He was out hunting, and his horse stepped on a trap. The king fell and was trampled on. Everyone claimed that I’d planted the trap, and that I was waiting in the bushes because I was the one that found him. The royal family offered me a way out when they saw you, their own daughter was gravely ill at the time, and they did not want to risk not having an heir.”

And so, I became a little shadow.

I nodded slowly. “And so, you took their money and handed me over to them as if I were not really yours anyway.” My words were harsh, but she had abandoned me to live a life of abuse at their hands.

Elizabetia’s neck might have snapped if she had turned any faster. “No, I did not accept anything from them. I thought they would give you a better life than the one you would have had with me on the run. It was not the life I wanted for you. I regretted it as soon as I handed you over.”

“What about my real father? Did he get a say, or did he not want me either?” I asked. Jesper’s chest pressed closer to my back, his warmth making me relax.

The woman frowned, and she stared at me, and I saw my own eyes burn into my soul. “Your father was an incredible man. We were never suited to

one another, but we made you, and he would have cared for you *if* he had known about your existence.”

“Who was he?” I demanded, but she narrowed her eyes.

“I’ll not tell you if you speak to me like that. You might be a queen, but you should have some respect for those around you.”

I scoffed at her audacious comment. “I’ll show you respect when you have earned it. All I know about you so far is that you would give up your child.”

It was Jesper that spoke next, “I think we should stop and make camp. It’s feeling a little hostile here, and I don’t like it.” His words were light-hearted, but they left no room for argument.

I was raging, nostrils flared. “Fine,” I bit out. “But this isn’t over.”

Elizabetia mirrored my expression, and I realised just how much I must take after her. She was as quick to anger as I was.



We stopped a little further along, still deep in the forest that separated much of the north from the south. The middle of Crimone was scarcely inhabited because of this – especially with the route that we were taking.

The sun had disappeared hours ago, and Elizabetia informed us we had made good progress with our travel. We wouldn’t have too far to go.

Kalline dished out the provisions so that no one would go hungry, and Riddel had vanished for half an hour to kill a rabbit – in case we did not have enough.

When we were fed, the group formed around the fire.

“There has been talk about the mutations. If they go well, it will lead to an army that can invade The Fourth Kingdom,” Elizabetia explained as she

stoked the fire. She sat opposite me on a log, while I was settled on a blanket.

The others were dotted around the fire too, trying to keep warm as the night air was not kind. Spring weather was still prone to having a winter chill in the north.

Eriel frowned, having kept rather quiet since the news of my mother's identity had been announced, aside from a few questions here and there. "Is that because it makes them stronger?"

Kalline chuckled mockingly. "I wouldn't say that Jesper or I are any better than Riddel," she commented, gesturing between them. "Aside from my gift, of course. But that would not be that useful when it came to being in an army."

Elizabetia cleared her throat to interrupt. "No, but that could change as the mutations continue. From my sources who are hiding out by the northern den, it seems that they are trying to produce an injection that will mutate a demon to become physically stronger than demons that exist already."

Could it be like the one I'd seen that fateful night?

"Making them nearly invincible," I added, staring at the flames. "If they succeed, they would stand a better chance at facing whatever lurks across the water."

"And from the stories, it is nothing good," Elizabetia sighed. "There are rumours that the people there can change into incredibly powerful beasts."

"What, like the mutations do to demons?" I asked, thinking of the beast that attacked my parents.

Even if it was insensitive to the demons around the fire, I didn't apologise.

"No, I believe it is far worse than the mutations. There is mention of magic being involved, but no one can be sure since no spy ever makes it out alive."

I took the flask offered to me and took a gulp of whiskey, which was unexpected, but pleasant. It warmed my body, and I handed it back to Riddel. She had still not brought up Posy, and I doubted she would.

The two had been close, and if she wanted to be private in her grief, I would respect it.

Jesper shuffled closer to me, and I felt his arm brush against mine. I was suddenly aware of everything about him – the way he smelt, the way his

golden eyes trailed over my body, and the way his hand ran over my thigh before settling there.

“My father,” I blurted, not ready to deal with Jesper right there. I knew I would get distracted, and I didn’t need that. “Who was he?”

Everyone raised their heads at this, the change in conversation abrupt, but my mind would not let me forget it.

Elizabetia hesitated, but she straightened. She swept her cloak to one side and took something out of her pouch. I saw that she was wearing some brown trousers and a red blouse that was covered by a darker brown corset. She pulled out a locket and stood to bring it over to me. “King Everon of Wertheria. He was your father – before he became king, mind you.”

I stared at the locket that was dropped into my palm, and my face screwed up in confusion. “What is this?” It looked old and had rusted along the chain. It was a little worse for wear, and I wondered if it had been new when she was given it.

“It’s a locket,” Jesper answered in his silky but teasing voice.

“Shut up, I know that, obviously,” I grumbled to him. I turned the locket over in my hands before looking back at the woman who had abandoned me. “My father was a king?”

She nodded, crouching in front of me now. The woman was fit for her age, the light of the fire revealing more greys, yet she looked just as beautiful as she did in my paintings.

Elizabetia continued to speak, “I met him when I was twenty. My parents had died, and I took to travelling, doing exactly what I do now, giving to the poor and stealing from the wealthy. Your father was training at a famous school called the Wister Academy.”

My eyes flickered to Jesper, recalling his aunt. Jesper was looking down at me throughout, giving me a squeeze when I met his gaze. I cleared my throat, ignoring the intensity I felt from him. “And?”

“And we fucked.”

“Oh, by the goddesses!” I pulled my hands up to cover my ears. I could hear the others laugh, Jesper’s chest vibrating against my arm, and I looked between them with a scowl. “You’re my mother. Could you spare me the details?”

“My apologies.” Elizabetia chuckled heartily, the sound loud but not unpleasant. I felt myself softening, despite the anger I felt towards her.

“Well, after that, I became pregnant. Your father was called back to the castle after your grandfather, King Padrick, was attacked. I went to tell him the news but was sent away by a man named Jerone Alard.”

“I met his son, Azariah Alard,” Eriel added from where he was. “He is married to Princess Lysandraya.”

Elizabetia nodded slowly, glancing between us. “She is your half-sister. I went to speak to her a couple of months ago to answer some of her questions. She has been looking for you, Majesty.”

My sister. A real sister. She was looking for me? Why would she do that?

“As I was leaving, I happened across something. I found the locket and recognised it as your father’s. I thought about giving it to the princess, but something told me you would want it as proof.”

Elizabetia wasn’t wrong. It felt like, as I tightened my grip on the locket, it was all the proof I needed.

I cleared my throat, an emotion I didn’t recognise rising in my throat, so I tried to suppress it. “Why do you still call me Majesty?”

The question caught the woman off guard, but she answered quickly, “I have no right to call you anything else. You were my Cate, but I lost the right to call you that the moment I handed you over.”

“You did,” I affirmed, despite something inside pulling at my heartstrings. *Was I wrong again?*

No. I couldn’t be. She had given me up – she’d made her bed and now she must lie in it.

Eriel interrupted the awkward silence that followed my words, standing up and brushing off his trousers. “We should all get some rest. I’ll take the first watch.”

His comforting brown eyes settled on mine, and I mouthed ‘thank you’ to him, already moving to get comfortable on my blanket.

I lay there for some time with my eyes open, unable to process what I’d been told. I still gripped the locket in my fingers, and I could feel Jesper’s firm back against mine as he shared the space with me. Eventually, he moved, and I could hear the sound of whispers, but not what was being said.

A couple of changes happened at that time, no one noticed I was awake.

“Don’t wake her.” I could hear Jesper say the words clearly. “She needs her rest.”

A few murmured responses came, but then it fell silent once more.

Eventually, I sat up. Disappointed that my fiancé was no longer behind me.

Kalline glanced over at me from where she was keeping watch, twirling a blade in her hands. “Jesper went to go and get some water from the stream if you wanted to follow him,” she answered, a knowing glint in her eyes.

“I’m not...looking for him,” I said, unconvincingly.

I didn’t bother to explain where I was going as I went in the direction she had gestured to. The stream was not far away from us, as Elizabetia had ensured we found one, since we needed to replenish the flasks with boiled water.

Dawn was beginning to break. The sky, whilst still dark, was beginning to show signs of a sunrise. The purple tinge was fading into my favourite shade of pink.

I made out Jesper’s large form by the stream as he stood beside it, the flasks put to one side. I stepped on a twig, and it snapped, but the man did not even flinch. It was as though he already knew someone was behind him – but more so – that it was me.

“Couldn’t sleep, darling?” I asked, teasingly.

As I got closer to him, I stopped suddenly. In front of him, in the stream, lay a figure.

The figure’s hand rested in front of Jesper, cut off from the body. The body was face down in the water, unmoving. Blood dripped from Jesper’s dagger that he held, and I let my gaze snap up to his eyes, where his mark was beginning to burn.

No longer the number five, it curled into a six.

I gulped, realising just how easy it was for this man to kill. He had seemed so nonchalant about it when we were at Henvale. Jesper had killed again – and he seemed completely fine about it.

Was he not overcome with guilt?

“Who... who was that?” I asked him carefully, slowly shuffling my feet and moving to stand at his side.

I felt his arm brush against mine as he got closer. “Someone who might have been trying to kill you, Kitty Cat. I didn’t want to take that chance by having them find the camp.”

I raised my foot and kicked the person’s shoulder so they would roll over. The man could not have been much older than me, and he was

clutching something in the hand still attached to his body. I crouched to reveal what it was. A piece of parchment was rolled up, and after tearing it open, I searched through the words.

“Jesper... you’re a fool!” I gasped, standing up and shoving the parchment against his chest so that he could take it to read it. “He wasn’t trying to kill me. He had word for me from Serena Everenden.”

Jesper huffed. “Well, I wasn’t meant to know that. I was just thinking about your welfare,” he replied, screwing up the parchment and throwing it over his shoulder without a care. “I would do anything to make sure you’re safe and sound.”

I scoffed, frustrated with him. “What? You would keep my mother’s identity a secret and kill innocent people.”

“If it keeps you safe, then yes,” Jesper said deliberately, as though I couldn’t understand him.

I narrowed my eyes when the man couldn’t accept that he had done something wrong and shoved his chest to make him stumble back, but he would not budge.

So, I tried again, not learning from my mistakes, as I knew I stood no chance against the strong man. I couldn’t imagine what a demon would be like if they received an injection that would make them stronger – they were already strong enough as it was. “I want you to go. I want you to leave my kingdom,” I spat out, the words acidic in my mouth. “I never want to see you again.”

A lie.

“You don’t mean that.” Jesper chuckled darkly, the sound both arousing and infuriating, with a crooked smile. “You love me.”

“I could never love a man who acts so impulsively,” I snarled, pushing my shoulder against his arm as I made to walk back to the camp. If I couldn’t get through to him, I would leave.

Even if he was right.

Jesper was quicker than me, and he tugged my arm so I would fall back against his chest.

“Do you not see?” He gripped my neck and made me look into his eyes that were dancing with carnality. My breath hitched as I stared up at him. I could feel his heart beating against my head.

“See what?” I whispered, shakily.

“I would set the kingdom on fire if it meant keeping you safe. I would kill until my face was covered in this cursed ink if it meant you were happy.” The growl that left him made my body hot. He clutched me tighter, his hand snaking around my waist so he could splay his hand on my stomach. “And I will continue to protect you – *I live for you*. My life is yours, Cate.”

Jesper’s words were passionate and sincere, and I could see a range of emotions flashing across his face as he waited for a response. To hear my real name from his lips, and only from his, made my stomach flip. It was a declaration of love and yet, despite knowing I felt the same, I did not say it.

I still couldn’t.

Instead of forming a reply, I gripped the collar of his crimson over coat – pulling his face down to mine and placing my lips roughly on his. There was nothing gentle about it, our teeth scraping and our mouths bruising. His hands roamed over my body, igniting a fire under my skin, and I turned myself around in his hold to wrap my arms around his neck.

Nothing else mattered other than us at that moment. I knew then that Jesperin Utara was the only person I would ever love so deeply.

And that, perhaps, we deserved each other.

Chapter Twenty-Seven



“Serena!” Eriel’s face lit up as we reached the top of Laxia Hill. It was what stood between us and the north. The ride had been relatively quiet after our stop, and we made it to the north in good time.

Lord Halle sent word that we could stay in his home while we were there. Eriel had thought ahead and sent word to the man before we left, and I was grateful to have such an organised friend. He saved me from worrying about anything and yet all I did was cause *him* to be concerned.

Serena rode towards us from the west side of the hill. Her long white cloak flew behind her and curls assaulted her face. However, the woman could not have looked more radiant when a wide smile crossed her face as she heard Eriel.

“Since when was she Serena?” I coughed; amusement laced in my voice.

Eriel’s cheeks flushed, and he ran a hand through his hair. “Oh, uh...”

“No, no. Please, don’t let us interrupt your reunion.” I chuckled, feeling Jesper’s arms tighten their hold round me.

Serena stopped in front of our group, a small party of warriors behind her. They were heavily armoured, and I was glad that her king had her safety in mind. She was an important asset, and I knew that I would do the same if it were Eriel. She brushed some hair behind her ear, untangling a

golden earring in the process. How did the woman look so refreshed and beautiful after days, probably weeks, of travelling from Wertheria?

“Your Majesty.” She bowed her head politely to me, and I returned the gesture. “I came as soon as you sent word.”

“I sent word?” I asked, but when I saw the bashful look on Eriel’s face, I managed a smile. “Ah, yes, I did.”

“King Valentine sends his regards and asked that anything found at the mutation den be reported back to him – and if you need his assistance, his men will be at your disposal,” Serena announced, seriously. The woman was known for being an exceptional diplomat. She carried herself with a grace that was to be admired and envied.

“I am grateful. Thank you for coming so quickly. I am sure what we find here will be important to all the kingdoms,” I spoke, loud enough for the men behind her to hear too. Jesper’s wandering hands squeezed my hips, and I did my best to stay firmly seated, our kiss by the stream not forgotten.

I could tell he was thinking about the same thing as he pressed himself further against my behind.

“Behave. You know now isn’t a good time,” I bit out to him.

“I’m trying, but someone keeps fidgeting,” Jesper huffed, his voice barely a whisper.

“Just... be patient.”

Serena looked between Jesper and me for a moment before she turned her head to Eriel. “I have the information you asked for, Er – Lord Swan.” She also blushed at the near slip of using his name, and I made a note in my mind to ask Eriel about how often the two had been writing.

Eriel nodded, and Serena took this as a chance to continue. The people there were trustworthy if he was not stopping her. “I sent some men to the mutation den – they were not able to get inside as the security is high, but it does seem that your brother is not there. There was no sign of anyone camping nearby.”

Eriel and I exchanged a glance at her words since Willen had still not sent word to us. It would have been difficult anyway, since we were no longer in Henvale, but we might have been able to intercept the messenger on the road. “What else, Serena?”

“There was talk of a vial.” I felt Jesper tense behind me, leaning forward as Serena continued, “Inside is a liquid that can be injected to

neutralise mutations. The men discussing it said that they had tested it. That is what you were looking for, isn't it, Majesty?"

I nodded and placed my hand over one of Jesper's, giving it a gentle squeeze in the hopes of soothing him.

Riddel spoke up on behalf of Jesper, "Did they say how it works, My Lady?"

"No, my men did not hear anything else of use, but there is at least confirmation a cure exists and that it works," Serena answered, and she glanced over her shoulder, where one of the warriors nodded to show she was correct in what she had told us.

Eriel narrowed his eyes at the pair, and I could feel the jealousy emanating off him. I had become accustomed to the emotion after Jesper had displayed it often around Lord Halle.

"What are our next steps then, Kitty Cat?" Jesper asked me. The people around us were used to his names by now. "Are we going to head there?" I could tell he was eager to get moving. He was so close to ending the mutation inside of him. I would be able to cure my parents – which would lose me the throne.

I would lose my crown if they made a full recovery.

What would happen to me when they were cured? What would my place be then? I would have to explain why I had lied to the kingdom.

"I think it best we stay here. We will make a camp and then contact Lord Halle. With his help we will make a plan of attack," I announced, turning my horse in the direction Riddel gestured to. "And we will try to contact Willen."



Narim Halle came to meet us in the evening. A small camp had been set up, and I was glad that Serena travelled with tents. The wind was less harsh inside, and I was glad to be sitting on some cushions. They were plush in comparison to the blankets we'd brought with us, and between Serena and Narim, we had a lot of food supplies.

Along with the supplies, more appropriate clothes for the cold had also been brought, and I was glad to be dressed in some trousers. Kalline made some adjustments to the clothes with her gifts, making the material warm – yet soft at the same time.

On my top half, I wore a deep cobalt overcoat that reached down around my legs much like a dress. The top came up to my neck and was buttoned down until under my chest. It was lined with fur and belted around the centre – with a beautiful ornate gold detailing on the material. Underneath was a pair of normal black trousers. Everyone else changed, and I could not help but admire Jesper in his red and black ensemble.

Narim probably thought that it was gaudy and too much, but Jesper suited it. It made his hair shine, and it hugged every part of his body perfectly. The trousers hugged every muscle of his toned thighs, and I let my eyes travel up to where his red shirt was tucked away under a black cape, buttoned at his neck. The cape was surprisingly detailed with red embroidered swirls.

Jesper kept his distance since finding out there was a cure for his mutation. It was strange since Kalline was not so impacted by it, and I wondered if she was keen to be injected herself.

Kalline and Riddel were in conversation, and I noticed how weary Riddel looked. Her time in the Henvale dungeons must have been catching up with her.

Which was my fault – but she still did not wish for me to apologise.

“Where should we start then, Majesty?” Elizabetia asked, a drink in her hand as she sat beside Narim, who was in awe of her. After he found out he was in the presence of the well-known outlaw; he had been dazzled. It was as though there were no one else in the room, and I had to admit I missed the attention.

Especially when it was now directed at my mother.

Elizabetia smiled coyly at Narim and tapped her glass against his. She knew what she was doing. I cleared my throat to bring their attention to

me. “No one has been able to contact Willen, so we shall assume the worst – that he has been captured or killed.”

The murmurs at me revelation had me regretting my bluntness. I should have handled it with more care.

“My brother would not have revealed anything, so we do not have to fear being found out. He would rather die than reveal his link to you,” Eriel replied, clearing his throat.

He was right, his brother had always been a man of honour and loyal to the royal family.

Eriel handed me something to drink, and I took a sip, surprised at how unpleasant the wine tasted. Not wanting to look like I was being ungrateful, I finished the glass and handed it back to him so he could pour another. It was giving me the courage to continue with the planning.

“With what we know of the place, how should we proceed to enter the area?” I asked, my hands clasped together in front of me.

After taking a loud gulp of his wine and wiping his lips with the back of his sleeve, Jesper replied, “We go in groups. It’s better to not all get caught together.”

I was pleased he was taking the conversation seriously, as, despite his showmanship, he was good at planning. *He had overtaken the island, after all.*

“The place is surrounded by guards.” Serena sighed, tucking a curl behind her ear to keep it from distracting her. “And it’s quite large. I believe it’s an old estate that was abandoned years ago.”

“You know more about the kingdom than those of us that live here,” Eriel teased.

“Someone has to.” Serena smirked, and she sat up straighter, proud of her reply. “Now, if we go in groups, that will allow us to cover all the entrances. There are the main gates to the place, but once we pass through there, there are three doors – one at the front and back and a third to the side.”

“Well, there are certainly enough of us to split up,” Riddel said, leaning forward on her knees. Her clothes were similar to mine, in a dark purple, except she had draped brown furs around her neck to keep warm. “How should we divide?”

“I’m going with Cate,” Jesper answered with ease.

There were some questioning glances at the use of my real name, but it was Lord Halle and Serena that looked the most confused. Instead of giving them a chance to respond, I said, "I'll decide who I go with."

"Alright. But you'll pick me in the end." Jesper smirked and ran his hand over the back of my head in an affectionate manner that had my traitorous heart skipping a beat.

I cleared my throat and looked back around at the people. "Elizabetia," her name was strange on my lips, "you, Narim, and Kalline go together. Take the back entrance with a couple of Serena's men."

"Yes, Majesty," the words echoed, and I realised they had all given their consent. Narim looked thrilled at the idea of being paired with my mother.

I turned my head to Serena next. "Are you sure you wish to come with us? It will not be safe."

"I have fought in battles before." Serena smiled, her hand moving to rest over Eriel's gently. Their first experience had been at a failed wedding in Wertheria. Eriel's lips formed a brilliant smile when Serena touched him, and I knew I would have to give up my friend eventually.

"Alright, then the two of you should go together, through the front. It is easier to get to safety that way," I ordered, but the words came out softer than I intended, my thoughts of the two of them clouding my resolve. "And Jesper, Riddel, and I will go through the side."

Riddel bowed her head. "Forgive my interruption, but what are we going to do when we are in there? This is all well and good, Cat—" when I did not stop her, she continued, "but we have no idea what we're *actually* looking for. The cure to the mutations could be anywhere in that building."

Jesper was the one that replied, running a hand through his hair, which mixed the silver strands with the red, "Does it matter? Our main aim is to ruin the place. If we can destroy most of their den, we will most likely find out where they're storing the cure, as they'll rush to save it."

"Not necessarily," I countered. I looked up at him to see his intense stare as he waited for my full reply, and I found that I lost my trail of thought for a moment. Jesper sensed this and smirked, which made me more determined to finish. "They have developed a way to make demons stronger too – surely that is what they want to protect? They've been testing on demons for some time, and they may have finally mastered their injection."

“I suppose... but if we wait to find out what it looks like, we might never attack, and we would be found out. Do you want to return to your parents empty-handed?” Jesper asked, and I felt my shoulders tense. As much as his words were blunt and angered me at first, he was right. I did want to cure them. That’s what Catania would have wanted me to do, and I owed her that much.

Even after all that had happened between us. I would do it for the Catania that loved me – and that I loved in return.

“Alright. It’s not exactly a good plan, though. If our sources are correct, then Sir Siwel will be here. Lord Josephite and Olliea are not, but we already know of their involvement and can confront them at a later date. And whoever the mysterious hooded figure is,” my eyes flickered to Elizabetia, “we will uncover them too.”

Elizabetia smirked as she realised I was accusing her. “My people will be joining us in the morning. They were caught up in with some wealthy Dalvestans.”

I hummed my response. I let Riddel draw on the rough map that Serena and Narim had formed for us.

Eriel looked up when one of Serena’s men walked into the tent with a note. He glanced over it with wide eyes, and we all waited for his response. “Willen – he has sent word for me to meet him. I’ll go now and see what he wants. I assume he cannot leave his post.”

That was a relief – at least we did not need to worry about him.

I nodded when he looked to me for permission. “Just be careful, Eriel.”

The man nodded, glancing at Serena, who raised her hand awkwardly to say goodbye. The two of them were perfect for each other – clearly.

Eriel rushed from the tent, and the others went back to the map. We had too many holes in our plan, but we would have to take the risk. We needed that cure, and we needed to bring Sir Siwel and the other men down. I’m sure they would not take being brought down by their queen well.

But I would revel in it.



“Are you well, Kitty Cat? You hardly ate a thing and that isn’t like you at all.” Jesper pulled back the entrance to my tent and entered, tying it closed behind him.

I looked up from the locket Elizabetia had given me and Jesper approached until he was able to crouch in front of me. He snatched the locket out of my hands and held it up between us.

“I should send it back, shouldn’t I?” The words left my lips solemnly, catching the trinket when he dropped it into my open hand. “To King Valentine – my brother.”

“Or you could keep it for yourself.” Jesper shrugged. “There is no harm in it. I’m sure they have lots of things from their father.”

“If only Elizabetia wasn’t such a good thief, I wouldn’t have to make this decision,” I grumbled and placed the locket back around my neck for safekeeping. I could feel his eyes following the action, and I reached out to take his chin between my thumb and forefinger. “What are you doing here, anyway?”

He leaned into my touch like a man starved of affection. “I’ve come to finish our conversation,” he teased, and his hands moved up my legs from my ankles to hold the sides of my thighs.

I raised an eyebrow and brushed my thumb over his bottom lip slowly, appreciating how soft it was. Mine had become cracked because of the change in weather, but the man never failed to surprise me with his level of care for himself. “Which conversation?” I asked him.

Before I could react, his lips were on mine. His hand was on the back of my neck, and he had pushed his way between my legs, his chest pressing to mine. The kiss, whilst sudden, did not have the same sense of urgency it

had by the stream. He was gently caressing my lips with his own, running his tongue over my bottom one to seek entrance into my mouth.

I gave it to him with a soft moan and felt his other hand reach down to hold my behind, pulling me down onto the floor with him. I could feel his fingers moving up my sides and to the belt around my waist. The man was quick, his hands working faster than I could comprehend, as soon, I was left wearing nothing.

There was a chill in the air, but that did not deter either one of us.

Jesper pulled back and let out a low whistle as he stared at my bare skin. "I was right. You truly are perfection."

I flushed as his eyes travelled over my bare body before his lips brushed down my neck to my chest, his tongue swirling around one of my nipples. I gasped as he bit down on it, my hand tangling in his hair tightly, feeling him groan against me.

It was my turn to be the impatient one.

"Shut up," I mumbled, pulling his lips back to mine. I began to remove his clothes, my fingers brushing over his abdominal muscles once I'd shed him of his upper layers. The clothes were fiddly, and every button felt like an obstacle.

"Now, now, Kitty Cat, there's no need to rush. Not unless you are desperate to have me inside of you," Jesper taunted, and his smile was wicked as he pulled away to look at me – which prevented me from tugging him back to my lips. I was pleased to see he looked thoroughly kissed, his hair a mess after my fingers ran through it.

"Hm... you're rather handsome, Ulara," I whispered hotly, brushing my lips against his. "You look rather adorable with your hair all messed up."

Jesper smirked and he pressed a kiss to my lips. "Are you suggesting I'm soft?" A moan left my lips when I felt him cup my folds, his thumb circling my bud. "Because, I'm not a gentle man, Kitty Cat."

"I know, darling," I muttered, gasping when he pushed a finger in slowly but was quick to add a second when I got used to the feeling. "I don't expect you to be."

His fingers curled inside of me perfectly, and I threw my head back in pleasure as he continued to rub my bud in hard circles. It was as though he knew exactly how I liked the movement, his fingers stretching me as he added a third.

His movements were not gentle, and I could feel my release rising within me after a few moments of his fast movements.

“Now, come for me, Kitty Cat. I want to hear you purr,” he teased gruffly against my earlobe, his teeth tugging on it before pressing a soft kiss below my ear.

I couldn’t help but let out a small laugh at his awful attempt at flirting, and I watched his lips twitch into a crooked smile.

“That’s an even better sound.” Jesper grinned, and his movements sped up when he heard my moans of pleasure, and I felt that coil unwind inside of me as my thighs shook, my hand gripping his wrist to keep him there whilst I rode his hand. My pleased sounds filled the tent.

“Good girl,” Jesper murmured against my neck, and he pulled his head away to press lazy kisses along my jaw.

I felt small in his arms, the man twice my size, and he easily moved to lay on his back – allowing me a better look at his body.

Jesper was a man who would have undertaken years of physical training, his pale skin littered with scars. I trailed my fingers over his side where there was one large one and looked at him questioningly.

“You have to ask me if you want to know,” Jesper said in amusement, his hands resting on my thighs as I climbed over his body to straddle him.

I chewed the inside of my cheek as I hesitated. “What are these from?” I asked him eventually.

Jesper’s eyes sparkled at having won me around, and he glanced at where my fingers were. “Well, that one was when I angered someone in an inn. He was right to do it – I did tell him I’d slept with his mother.”

“And had you?” I queried, unsurprised by his antics, almost before he had even finished his sentence. However, a strange jealousy settled within me.

He smirked, squeezing my thighs. “No, I hadn’t. But the man couldn’t take a joke.”

“That’s because you’re not very good at telling them.” I rolled my eyes and brushed my fingers higher. “And this one?”

“Riddel hit me a bit too hard.”

I laughed at this, not having expected so many of his wounds to be in such mundane circumstances. “Are there actually any from your fights taking over the island?”

Jesper smirked, tapping his ink under his eyes. “The two. They were the first people I killed.”

“You consider that a scar?” I inquired, curious as I leaned down, pressing a brief kiss to his lips.

“It is. I won’t ever be able to get rid of it, and I only got it because of violence.”

Using my index finger, I brushed along the mark on his face, wondering if it would change again. “Why did you take over the island?” I asked him softly.

The question caught him off guard, his eyes widening a little. “Well, I knew I needed power to search for the cure and it appeared to be the easiest option. You would have to acknowledge me, of course, but I like to think it was go big – or go back to being a pirate.”

“Hm, I think you would make a rather dashing pirate. I’m sad to have missed that,” I teased.

Jesper grinned wickedly. “Maybe I’ll give you a demonstration one day.”

I snorted, before pressing my lips to his again. “Whatever you say, Captain, I look forward to it. Are we done talking now?”

Jesper was easily distracted by the second kiss, his hands moving to guide my hips against his clothed ones, and I let out a soft moan into his mouth. I could feel him smile, and his hand wrapped around my neck, tugging me back so he could answer. “Are you that desperate for me?”

I nodded slowly, before rocking my hips against his, making him groan low.

With an easy smirk, Jesper reached for a pocket in his jacket, holding up a recognisable vial of liquid. We both took it without much said between us.

“Alright, my sweet, take me,” Jesper teased, putting his hands behind his head on the floor. I was astonished by the action but decided to take it upon myself to do as he asked.

“I’m a selfish lover, you know,” I told him and moved my hand down to his trousers to push him out of them. I took the time to pull them off his legs and then resumed my position. Jesper did not move once to help me. “I’ll take until I get what I want.”

“I wouldn’t expect anything else from you, Kitty Cat. But when you’ve had your fill, I’m going to take mine. You’re going to beg me to give you

what you crave.” Jesper smirked and grunted deeply when I lowered myself down onto his already hardened length with a whimper.

He filled me completely, my hips grinding on his to get used to the feeling, his groans of pleasure only making me do it again.

“You better start moving, or I will retract my statement, put you on your hands and knees, and leave you unable to walk for a week,” he growled, and I could see in his eyes that he was determined.

“I’d like to see you try.” I smirked and placed my hands on his chest to steady myself. I began to move, rocking myself down against him at a reasonably fast pace.

Between his groans, and his fingers digging into my skin as he helped to guide me, he got out, “Keep going, my sweet, and I’ll prove you wrong.”

I moaned when his hands gripped my behind and squeezed tightly. “Just like I want you to then?” I teased.

Jesper moved his hand and my back arched when he began to rub my bud once more, already sensitive from my previous release. “Then release for me so I can fulfil your wants.” His coerced smoothly, but I was too pleased to care.

His hands were rough as he thrust hard from below me. “Even when you’re on top, I’m still in charge, Kitty Cat. You’re mine.” His golden eyes captivated me, and I found I was unable to look away. He was right, every movement between us was orchestrated by him, his thumb pressing harder on my bud until I was squirming in pleasure on top of him – cries leaving my lips.

My thighs shook. “Jesper!”

With previous partners, I’d never felt like this. I would release once, *if they were good enough*, or they would leave me to do so myself. Jesper was putting my pleasure before his own – a man who knew every way to satisfy me.

Why we had chosen to stay on the floor, I didn’t know, but there was something erotic about being on the ground with him. A rawness I had not experienced with anyone else. Once I’d ridden out my release, he turned me onto my hands and knees, as promised.

“That’s a good girl.” The words, in any other context, would have annoyed me. Yet hearing the seductive way they left his lips, I clenched with anticipation, ready to feel him inside of me all over again. “Look at

you, so pretty and needy..." He chuckled, his fingers stroking my folds, and I moaned in response.

"Jesper, please."

"Are you begging me, Kitty Cat? Oh, I like that. Do it again. I want to remember this," he teased, his hand smacking my behind, which left a stinging sensation. I gasped in delight, the pain mixing with pleasure.

"Jesper, I will kill you if you don't get inside of me."

I could see his smirk in my mind as he squeezed my rear again. "Is that a threat or a promise?" He gave me no chance to respond to his question, instead thrusting into my folds deeply enough to distract me from any thoughts I had – hitting a spot deep inside of me.

That was how we spent the next hour or so, our bodies entwined and his length filling me in ways I had only dreamed of.

I'd curled into his arms while he threw the blanket from the makeshift bed over us, his hands pressing my body into his, and I took a deep breath in. I allowed myself not to think of anything but the two of us.

"You said my name," Jesper whispered against my ear, his hand stroking up and down my back.

"I did," I replied, feeling him smile against my neck as he trailed his lips over my skin. "You said you would make me... and you did."

"I'll mark that off from my list of things to do. Have you crying out my name in ecstasy? Check."

"How long is that list?" I asked him, amused.

He chuckled, pressing a couple of kisses along my jaw. "There are quite a few things regarding you on there, but I can't tell you them. Otherwise, they may not happen."

"What a stupid way of looking at it," I grumbled, letting him nuzzle his face against my neck. "Do you say that to all your partners after you've fucked them senseless?"

"Way to ruin the romantic mood, Queenie," Jesper teased. He tightened his hold on me, his warmth enveloping me. "But no, I don't. None of them have ever had quite the hold on me that you do."

"Hm, I like the sound of that. You're mine, Ulara. I don't want you thinking otherwise."

Jesper grinned against my skin, and he raised his head to look at me. "Oh, how possessive of you, Kitty Cat. I like this side of you."

"Don't you like all sides of me?"

Instead of answering my question, he muttered against my lips as he pressed a kiss to them, “I love you, Cate.”

I wanted to say it. I did. I knew he wanted to hear it back.

But I wound my fingers in his hair and tugged his lips back to mine, my tongue parting his lips to fight for control. *I would say it eventually – just not yet.*

Chapter Twenty-Eight



“Are you sure about this, Cat?” Eriel frowned, adjusting the fur cloak on his shoulders, reluctant to leave my side when we reached the side door of the large, neglected manor. Serena had already guided her men around to the front door, where they would wait for him there.

I thought he was concerned, so I gently patted his arm. “We must do this – for Jesper and Kalline. For my parents and everyone else that has been affected. I’ve never been so sure about anything else in my life.”

“I understand that... but what if we’re wrong about this? What if the mutations could help with The Fourth Kingdom? You know they’re becoming even more of a threat now – with the emergence of magical gifts too, people might start turning against each other in the kingdom–”

“Don’t, Eriel. We can’t think about it like that. Kalline is the only one we know about with a magical gift. We do not need to worry yet. The most important thing is curing those who have been mutated or been affected by it.”

“I just think maybe we need to turn back and think this through more.”

“If we spend too much time planning, we might lose our chance,” I argued, firmly shaking my head. My mind was made up.

Eriel ran a hand through his hair with a heavy sigh, and I raised an eyebrow. “Did you cut your hair?” I asked him.

“Serena said she liked it shorter,” he replied quickly. “So, I trimmed it last night.”

“Oh, well, it suits you.”

Eriel smiled nervously. “Thank you. Speaking of Serena, I should go and join her... if you need me, you know where I’ll be.”

I rolled my eyes playfully and gave him a small push in the right direction. “Good luck, Eriel.”

“I wish the same to you, Your Majesty.” Eriel stared at me for a moment longer than was normal. He was about to say something else when Arka began to growl low beside him. “Ah, I suppose that is my cue to go...” He looked panicked before he disappeared.

I tutted and scratched behind the wolf’s ears to calm him. “Come on now, Arka, calm,” I muttered. “So, we remember the plan?” I asked, Riddel and Jesper moving to be on either side of me.

“There’s not really much of a plan, is there?” Riddel quipped, twirling her daggers between her fingers. She turned to stare down at me and pressed one of them into my hands. “We go in, kill whoever stands in our way, and get out of there when someone finds the cure.”

Riddel was still angry with me – but she was not letting it get in the way of what we needed to do. She was professional.

“A good summary, but you forgot the part about taking the place over if we can,” I grumbled but gripped the golden handle of the dagger.

Jesper threw his cane up, an item I did not think I would see again since he had stopped carrying it since returning to Crimone from Demorai Island. As he threw it, he twisted it, revealing a blade at either end of it that replaced the fox. It was essentially a spear.

“Now that we covered all of that, we should head inside. I can’t wait to add this place to my list of conquests,” Jesper replied, gesturing for Riddel to the open door. We had been surprised upon arrival to see that the side door was unguarded.

It had left me unsettled, but we couldn’t turn back.

“You and your lists. Do I happen to be a conquest on there?” I mused but tucked the dagger Riddel had given me into my boot. I drew my sword instead – feeling more confident with it.

Still, I was rusty. I would have to brush up on my skills when we returned to Henvale.

Jesper chuckled at my words, and he brushed his shoulder against mine as he leaned down. “You were first on the list, Kitty Cat.”

“If you two are quite done ruining my day – can we get going?” Riddel looked disgusted at the display, and she left without another word. I shoved Jesper away from me with a smirk and followed behind the woman.

All I could hear were Jesper’s footsteps behind me as we walked into the dark building. Apart from that, it was eerily silent.

I realised that the two of them would probably have covered a lot more ground without me, but I was glad to have them at my side.

The place was hardly lit, but when a few torches came into sight, there was not much to make out. It was a series of abandoned rooms, and I wondered if perhaps we were too late – that the den had already moved.

Riddel put her hand out to stop us from walking any further, poking her head around the doorway of one of the rooms. She hesitated as she turned but raised a finger to her crimson lips to signal for us to be quiet and to come and look.

I approached with Jesper close behind, his hand resting on my shoulder as he looked over my head. Something soft touched my hand, and I felt Arka brush himself against the side of my leg as he waited beside us.

Inside, there were a few men I recognised. They were a part of Willen’s guard, and they were chained to the walls. Inside their arms, there was a tube that was draining them of their blood. The men were ashen, and they were barely hanging on to their lives. I wondered if some of them had already passed on to the goddesses.

I felt sick to my stomach, and I felt Jesper’s hand tighten on my shoulder. Riddel started to lead the way through, her voice quiet. “We should keep moving. They’re probably using that for something, and I don’t want to be next.”

We gave our silent agreement by speeding up. We passed through the room and slowly began to hear voices. The three of us shared a glance, and we waited to see where they were coming from.

“Queen Catania knows,” a surly voice said. “She’ll be coming here.”

“Fuck the Queen. If we have anything to go by, she’s a fraud anyway.”

I felt my blood run cold, and I could feel Jesper’s hand slide into mine. My hand gripped my sword tighter, feeling the weight beginning to leave a cramp in my wrist.

Riddel continued in front of us, and the voices began to get closer. The same voice that we'd heard first continued, "We were told not to move the vials by Sir Siwel."

"I thought Lord Olliea suggested we did?" the other man replied to him. That meant our plan was working – Narim had disguised himself and clearly managed to convince some of the men that they had been given orders.

I nodded when Riddel turned her head, waiting for guidance. With my approval, she lifted her velvet cape, creating a moment for Jesper and me to move undetected.

"Hello, boys. Do you mind handing that over to me?" she smirked, throwing her dagger right into the chest of the man closest to the crate of vials.

There were not as many guards as I expected there to be, but there was little time to dwell on that. We still didn't know what the vial was filled with, but we had to hope it was the cure.

I moved quickly with Jesper as a fight broke out. I recognised the voice of the man who had cursed about me before as he sneered. "Can you actually use that, girl?" he asked rudely, every word riling me. I could use that to my advantage.

With a smirk, I lifted the sword with both my hands. "Shall we test to see if I can?" I said, turning it between my hands carefully in an effort to show off.

It worked and the man's lips twisted into a snarl. "I've never fought a girl before, but I'm willing to make an exception now."

I clicked my tongue as I attacked, my sword hitting his. "Or maybe it was just that a *woman* never wanted to fight you for fear of bruising your fragile male ego."

My words had their desired effect as the man began to try and land a blow himself, all expertly dodged by me. Eriel was a good teacher, and I was using everything he'd taught me. I found I enjoyed the thrill – taking it as a chance to look for the man's weak spot.

We moved like that for some time, and I knew it was foolish to think that Sir Siwel would have put someone inexperienced in charge of something so important. I was convinced that Josephite was the third man involved and that he would reveal himself eventually. The other groups

may have had less luck with the vial but would be apprehending the leaders. *They had to be.*

I swung for the man again, but he defended the blow, his sword aimed at my wrist.

“Don’t you dare touch her!” In a flash, the man was spluttering blood, and I stared as he began to crumble to his knees. It was his neck that had been sliced through and Jesper stood behind him, his cane bloody.

There was not any other part of him out of place – he was flawless.

“Ulara!” I complained, putting a hand on my hip as I caught my breath. “That was my kill!”

“Sorry, Kitty Cat, next time I’ll let you get your hand cut off, shall I?” Jesper joked, lightly, and began to move to the crate.

I took a moment to look at the six men that lay at our feet and realised how much time I’d spent fighting one. I would have to be quicker with my attacks if I wanted to keep up. Even Arka was pulling his weight, as he had an arm dangling out of his jaws as the man let out a scream.

I watched as Jesper’s skin burned beneath his eye and the number changed again. I wondered what number it would settle on by the end of the day. His eye twitched, but that was his only response to the pain. He must have been used to it.

Jesper held up one of the vials, staring at the dark blue liquid inside. Bubbles rose when he shook it, changing the liquid to a green colour before changing back. “They’re not labelled.”

“Oh, yeah, because the bad guys would label everything to make it easier for us, wouldn’t they?” Riddel rolled her eyes, and she wiped her daggers on her sleeves, her purple eyes sparkling in the dim room as she came to stand beside me. “Why don’t you taste it, Jesper? Then we’ll see what happens?”

“I hate you, Riddy.” Jesper grunted, uncorking the vial, and taking a sniff after eyeing it warily. “Well, it doesn’t smell of anything.”

“Probably best not to ingest it until we know if it’s the cure,” I said, grabbing a bottle and handing it to Riddel. “Also, it’s a good idea to keep a spare in case this goes wrong.”

As if my words summoned them, more guards walked into the room. Riddel moved with speed to begin fighting, and Jesper and I were not far behind.

I became faster, slicing when the opportunity presented itself and watching people begin to drop.

These men and women probably thought they were fighting to protect the kingdom. *What lies had Siwel, Olliea, and Josephite filled their heads with?*

I grunted as I defended a blow from a large woman who towered over everyone in the room. I could not see her face beneath a red scarf she wore around her neck, but her scarlet eyes glowed. Why was a demon fighting with them?

It was no good, as the woman was far stronger than I. It was like a dance. One of us would attack and then we would switch. There had been no attempt on her part to actually injure, and I narrowed my eyes in confusion as I began to realise this.

“Who are you?” I questioned, but as her eyes widened in response, she ducked out of the room.

I was left standing there, panting, with no energy to rush after her. The adrenaline was beginning to decrease.

Suddenly, a hand tangled in my cloak and yanked me harshly back against their chest. I groaned when I realised who it was. Sir Siwel was glaring at me, and he pressed a knife against my neck, while another was aimed at my stomach.

“Comfortable, Majesty? I am surprised you have come to my little business without an invitation.”

“A queen doesn’t need an invitation,” I objected. “And I wouldn’t call your business little – in fact, it’s been causing me big problems.”

My eyes settled on Jesper and Riddel, who had successfully fought off the rest of the attackers but were watching us warily. They knew as well as I did that there could be no sudden movements. Sir Siwel probably would kill me without another thought.

There was always a way to replace me. I had to remember that.

The man chuckled harshly, and I felt it vibrate through my body. “Problems like what? Your parents?” he asked. “Gaining a throne? I would have thought that you would be grateful for my service. You don’t have to prove yourself because of me, little bastard.”

I didn’t need to think about what to do. All thoughts of a plan that I had tried to conjure up previously left me. I bit down on the exposed skin of

his wrist until he yelped and let go of me. Jesper held his hand out, and I ran into his arms.

“Oh, my sweet, thank the goddesses,” Jesper whispered, kissing my temple as he held me, relieved. *He didn’t even believe in the goddesses.*

“You should keep her on a leash, son,” Siwel growled, the word son sounded degrading on his lips.

A low whistle left my lips. “Oh, you shouldn’t have said that.” I tutted, already letting Jesper go as I knew his temper would be untameable at that moment. It was something I liked about him – *I don’t think I wanted to tame him.*

Jesper looked down at me, his gaze sparkling with mischief and anger. “Let me handle this, Kitty Cat. I’ll make him wish he were never born.”

I patted his chest. “You don’t need my permission, darling. Defend our honour,” I answered and let him step forward.

Sir Siwel did not show his emotion, but I could tell he was not as confident as he wanted us to believe. *I had a knack for seeing when men were crumbling.*

It was something I’d observed in the lords at court, even when they wanted to make me believe they had more power.

Jesper stepped forward, and he brushed his hand over the man’s shoulder as if flattening out any creases. “You would do well to remember you have just attacked your queen, Siwel,” Jesper mused as his hand brushed down to squeeze his arm, almost friendly to begin with. “And my future wife, so I’m afraid I can’t let you get away with it.”

His cane flew through the air, and I watched as it was about to plunge into the man before Siwel would even get a chance to defend himself. It stopped mere moments away from his chest as someone spoke from the doorway.

We had all been so occupied watching Sir Siwel that we did not notice the other figure. It was the hooded figure that we’d heard rumours about, cloaked in a deep red cape that hid all his features. There was something else recognisable about it, but I couldn’t put my finger on it.

“I wouldn’t do that if I were you,” the figure announced. “Your friends have been caught.” He could probably see the way I was fumbling for a new plan, trying to work out a way where we could all get out of there. However, we still had no idea how many guards were left. “There is no

point in fighting this, woman. You and your friends would do well to follow me.”

The figure turned and, for a moment, I thought I saw his clothes – they looked familiar, but it could have been a trick of the light.

Arka growled as he pressed himself back against me, sticking to my side as though he could protect me. Blood dropped from his mouth and his teeth were exposed – and he snapped his jaw at anyone that got too close. But even he could not protect me forever.

We were disarmed by another group of guards and dragged through to join the others. My heart dropped to my stomach as we entered the room we had been in before, still filled with people being drained of their blood.

But it was not the same people from before.

They had been moved, and hanging in their places were those dear to me. I felt a surge of panic and squirmed in the man’s hold, watching as Siwel moved to join the figure and the ashamed Olliea.

I didn’t care how uncomfortable he was – he would die for taking part in this.

Out of everyone, Eriel looked the most battered. He couldn’t hold his head up himself, and Serena shuffled closer to him when she thought no one was looking. Her dirty cheeks were stained with tears, but otherwise, she looked unharmed. Perhaps they were against harming women here – the thought made me want to chuckle bitterly.

They were probably not against anything here.

I tried to take in more of Eriel’s condition, but what caught my attention was his clothes. They were not the ones I’d seen him in earlier. His had been replaced with a torn brown shirt and some ill-fitting trousers. He was covered in dirt, and I wondered if it was not all from the attack.

The guard holding me loosened his grip when he made to tie my hands behind my back, but I took that moment to slam my head into his face. I could hear the crunch of his bones, as I probably broke his nose, before whirling around to be met by the cloaked figure.

He moved swiftly. His hands gripped my arms, and as I grasped his wrists, my gaze met his.

The figure hesitated for a moment when Arka growled at him, which allowed me to tug his hood off to confirm what I had seen.

My mouth fell open in horror. “Willen?”

Chapter Twenty-Nine



“You must be joking... what... I....?” No sentences wanted to form, so I closed my mouth quickly.

What was I supposed to do? Nothing had prepared me for such disloyalty.

I was glad, at that moment, that Eriel was not coherent enough to know about his brother’s betrayal. It would break his heart.

“Not going to mistake me for Eriel again?” Willen’s words were harsh, but he kept a hold of me so I could not escape his grip.

Well, he had me there. I’d been so blind to the switch.

Arka whimpered as he was grabbed and pressed to the ground, the wolf quickly chained down so he could not harm any of them. I watched as Jesper and Riddel were forced onto their knees beside the others, and I swallowed painfully, not able to think of anything. My mind had gone blank.

Willen was helping the mutators this whole time? All while pretending to be my friend?

“We’re going to give you a choice, Majesty.” Sir Siwel was the one that spoke, clearly the leader of the group. I wondered why, since his status was lower than everyone else. However, I could see the Olliea trembling behind him and realised that it was probably a good thing they did not base

it on the title alone. “You can save your friends here if you take this,” he held up a goblet, “poison. Kill yourself and save the others.”

“Or?” I asked, voice level.

Siwel was taken aback by this, but he cleared his throat as he continued, “You watch them die one by one until you hand over your throne.”

I considered it – just for a moment.

“Wow, they’re brilliant options, aren’t they?” Jesper spoke sarcastically from the side, and I heard a resounding smack as he was hit. I was proud of him for not even letting out a grunt, though I would not blame him if he had.

“You’ve already tried to poison me once before and it didn’t work,” I replied, turning my head to Willen. “I assume it is you we have to blame for that? Were you pretending to be Eriel then, too?”

The coin had finally dropped. Willen had been pretending to be his brother before the attack. It was why he had been acting so strangely and why his hair was so much shorter.

I should have paid closer attention – I should have worked it out sooner. I was a terrible friend.

I didn’t want to be right about it, but Willen’s lips twitched into a sly smile. “You really ought to get your eyes tested – you can’t even tell the difference between the two of us? Posy was a casualty of a bigger plan. I never expected that you would make it this far, Cate.”

The way he said my name – the venom it was filled with – made my heart stop. “Why do you hate me so much, Willen? We grew up together, we were friends. Your brother is my closest advisor, and you are my general–”

“That’s it, though. I’m *just* your general. You always favoured Eriel over me and so did your parents,” Willen grunted. “And you took away from me the one person that appreciated me.”

Catania.

I took Catania away from him, and he probably knew about what had happened.

“How did you... What do you mean?” I changed my question at the last minute, worried he didn’t know what I had done and that I would hand the answer to him.

Willen let out a bark of humourless laughter and threw his head back. While he and Eriel were twins, and I had always thought them handsome,

he looked ugly in that moment. He had been working from the inside; he knew all my secrets and now he was going to be my downfall.

“Catania and I loved one another, and you killed her out of cold blood. She would have married me, you know? I would have been King of Crimone,” Willen snarled, grabbing my chin whilst his other one kept a hold of my arm. His fingers dug into my skin, and yet, I did not move my gaze from him.

He would not intimidate me.

I could hear Jesper making a commotion, but another resonating smack shut him up. I did my best not to flinch at the sound, but my shoulders jolted. Willen smirked as his eyes flickered to the movement.

“You would never have been king – Catania never believed she would make it to be queen,” I got out.

“Do your little friends know what you did, hm? That you cold-heartedly killed an innocent girl to take her place?” Willen waved his hands as he spoke, gesturing to those kneeling.

I kept silent. That secret would stay between those who already knew it. Catania was in the wrong that day, but I didn’t want to share it with everyone in the room – it was my trauma to keep to myself and my choice to tell who I wanted.

Jesper was not on the same page as me as I heard him growl, “Catania attacked her, you dumb fucker. She fell down the stairs because of her own stupidity–”

Another smack. I heard Jesper groan this time. Willen scowled as he looked back at me, his eyes lacking any kindness they had once held. “Catania would never give up her crown. She knew how much the kingdom would have loved her.”

“She was sick, Willen,” I muttered. “She was scared about taking over – but she was also angry. She wanted *me* dead.”

He snarled, and his hand moved to grip a hold of my neck, the pressure making me let out a sudden gasp. “She would never have given up. For what you did, you’re going to pay. Watch your friends die or take the poison that was meant for you all along. You’ve already lost one friend because of your selfish acts. Don’t think I wasn’t there – wasn’t watching how you acted with Posy before she died. Another one of your victims.”

My hands stayed at my side, not fighting back.

He was right. I had harmed too many people to be forgiven for what I had done.

His fingers squeezed my neck, and I let out a sound. The pain was worse than when Eden had attempted the same thing – but before I’d been excited. All I felt when Willen did it was regret for what I’d done.

Although, the longer I stared at him, I began to feel less sorry for him. He was enjoying himself far too much; he knew what power he held in his hands, and he thrived with it.

He never loved Catania – he loved the idea of her. I’d taken his word for it, when I shouldn’t have.

Catania had never even looked in his direction when we were young.

She didn’t like him as much as he was making out. I started to recall our odd conversations before she had turned on me.



*“Willen and Eriel, handsome? You must be mad, Cate!” Catania giggled. “I like Narim Halle far more, now **he** was cute.”*



“I heard Willen asked you to meet him in the rose gardens tonight.” I smiled, leaning on the edge of her dressing table.

Catania had rolled her pretty eyes. “And I told him I couldn’t – I have no intentions of marrying anyone. I shall be single forever.”

“How can you be sure of such a thing?”

“Well, I can’t. But I know that I will not be marrying Willen Swan!”



“Willen is staring at you again.” I nudged Catania and pointed to where Willen and Eriel were waiting for us at the end of the hallway.

“I wish he would stop. I’ve already turned him down plenty of times.” Catania sighed. “But he just doesn’t seem to take no for an answer.”

“Would you like me to tackle him? Kick him in the behind? Put a rat in his bed?”

Catania laughed, holding her stomach. “Oh, Cate, you are funny. But he’s not worth you’re worrying. He means no harm.”



Who was he to tell me I was in the wrong?

Kalline caught us off guard by speaking. "I have such bad taste in men," she grumbled, which caused a laugh to fall from my lips.

It sounded crazy in that serious moment. It was a manic laugh, one that was a mix of panic and genuine humour.

"You're insane," Willen growled. "The laugh of a murderer."

"You're just as insane as me, Willen. You're not innocent either in all of this," I snapped, a crazed smile forming on my face. "If I'm going to die here, I'm going to kill you, too."

I kicked my foot, and it landed between his legs. He let out a loud howl of pain, dropping his hold and hunching over. It gave me the chance to steal his sword, about to slam it through him without any thought.

But then I hesitated when I heard Eriel's voice. He groaned, "Cat, please." His warm eyes locked with mine as Serena helped support his head, crusted blood at the corner of his lips.

He wanted me to spare his twin – the one who always had his back. *Until now, of course, but I couldn't point that out to him.*

The hesitation cost me, as a hand shot out to wrap around my wrist and pull my arm back until I yelped at the sharp pain. It made me drop the sword to the ground with a clang, a pain shooting up my arm.

"You've done it now," I heard Willen growl. "Bring in the beast!"

Before I could ask what he meant, I did not see the signal, but Jesper was grabbed. His hair was tugged hard, and he was kicked to the ground on his front. A boot landed on the side of his face, and I could not stop the yell that left me.

The door was yanked open, and I watched in horror as the beast from my nightmares stumbled in, with chains on his remaining arm to prevent him from turning on his captors.

The same monster that had killed my parents now stood before me.

Apart from, his features were more dominant this time. I could see who they had been before...

"Is that... oh, by the goddesses, no, that's my father!" Jesper yelled, his eyes wide. He was panicked, thrashing about.

His father. He hadn't died.

"Yes, quite. You really thought he had passed of natural causes? He was a dirty pirate – not to mention that ugly mark on his face that your maternal grandfather gave him," Siwel cackled, moving to Jesper's father.

"I saw him buried!" Jesper cried out. I'd never heard him so panicked.

Siwel rolled his eyes, as if bored by the man. "No, you just thought you did. It's quite easy to find bodies to burn."

The beast, no – Jesper's father, snarled as he was freed from his chains. There was not much humanity left in him. He didn't speak this time either, his mouth bared and enlarged to seem like a wolf's.

"What has he been injected with?" I asked, trying not to let them see how I was trembling.

Siwel shrugged. "Not sure – anything and everything. He was one of the very first test subjects and look at how magnificent he is."

"That's enough, Siwel," Willan warned Siwel, who sniffed indignantly and stepped back. "Now Attack, beast," Willen called, and he raised his hand to point at Jesper.

Jesper's father lunged towards his son, and I just hoped I wasn't too late. I didn't need a repeat image of what had happened to the king and queen.

I threw myself in front of Captain Ulara, who moved to a sudden halt in front of me. My legs shook as I tried to stay upright, my hands thrown out in front of me. "Stop!"

"Girl..." Captain Ulara's head moved to one side, curiously.

"What is he doing? Stop that, fool! Attack I say!" Willen yelled from behind, but he was too wary of the beast he had helped create to step forward.

Captain Ulara's breathing was heavy and filled with short snarls as he began to rear up onto two legs. "Girl..." he repeated, and I wondered if he

recognised me.

“Please, Captain, come back to us,” I begged softly, my hands shaking as I reached out to the snarling man.

He leaned his head down slowly and the room was completely silent.

No one dared to move in case he struck again.

“That’s it...” I whispered, my hand making contact with his face, the coarse skin unfamiliar. His yellow eyes widened as he studied me and I watched him open his mouth to speak, “C-Cate...”

He remembered the king and queen calling to me on the night of the incident.

“Yes. That’s me – I’m Cate,” I encouraged him.

Suddenly, a chain clamped around him and I was pulled back into Willen’s grasp. Captain Ulara let out a howl of pain before he was whipped by a long spikey cane that Siwel held.

The echoed cries of pain that filled the room would haunt me forever. I glanced to Jesper, who looked devastated.

He didn’t deserve to see his father in such a state – nor did his father deserve such a cruel fate.

“Stupid creature,” Siwel snapped, holding him still as two men injected him once more. Any progress that I’d made with Captain Ulara vanished and he became more beast than man once more.

He was called upon again to attack his son and I watched in fear as he leapt upon Jesper – holding him to the ground.

“Get off him! No! Stop!” I struggled in Willen’s painfully tight grasp, as he wrapped an arm around my middle to prevent me from leaping forward. “Let me go, you traitor!” I screamed, madly.

Jesper’s groans were laced with discomfort from his spot on the ground, his eyes trying to meet mine as his father pinned him to the stone.

“Fine, you can join him if you’re so desperate,” Willen grunted as he threw me to my knees before landing a firm kick against my back. I would have tried to stand, but his boot pushed down on my lower back to keep me there. I was just a few steps away from Jesper, yet unable to reach out to him.

“Hold!” Willen yelled to Captain Ulara, preventing him from killing Jesper there and then.

My hand moved, but I let out a cry when Willen stomped on my fingers, the bones cracking beneath his boot. The pain was astounding, and I

wanted to cradle them to my chest, but I still couldn't move. The tears pricked at my eyes, and my teeth sunk into my lip to stop any other whimpers of agony leaving me.

So many bones broken in such a short space of time.

"Come now, Majesty. Acting with sympathy is beneath you, isn't it?" Willen spat. "So, do not pretend you want mine now."

I could just about make out Jesper's face from the angle we were at and hear the words that always made my resolve crumble. "I love you, Cate."

Willen scoffed at this, releasing my poor fingers, and moving towards Jesper. I was winded, unable to bring myself to move just yet.

I would have to pick the right moment if I wanted to succeed.

The traitor gripped Jesper's soft hair tightly and tugged his head up. Jesper's ink was almost red, burning his skin, and his golden eyes were lacking their usual sparkle.

"She doesn't love you. She never loved you! That monster is incapable of love. She used to say how much she loved Catania, and you heard where that got her."

My eyes stung at the cruel words that fell from the man's mouth, and I whimpered on the ground, begging my eyes to open.

I do love him. I loved him more than anything else in the world.

My energy was not building again, and I knew that it was unlikely that I would be able to overpower Willen.

But there was something I could do to protect Jesper and the others.

I had to do it to save them. I didn't deserve forgiveness for all I had done, just as they didn't deserve to be punished for my mistakes.

"Give me the poison," I whispered weakly, using my good hand to push myself to my knees. I was trembling from the discomfort, before cradling my injured hand to my chest, my breathing irregular. "I'll take the poison. Just let them go."

"No!" Elizabetia shouted, Eriel's complaints not far behind, but nothing else mattered at that moment.

"You must let them go first. I'll take it willingly once I know they are safe," I told him.

"Hm...fine, we can give you one final request," Willen answered, hesitantly.

Sir Siwel muttered something about it being a ridiculous idea but moved to bring the others to their feet. They were not untied as they were

dragged out.

“Stop, don’t take it!” Elizabetia exclaimed. “Do not take that poison, Cate!”

Willen dropped Jesper’s head onto the ground, and he moved to me, snatching the goblet from Siwel and placing it to my lips. I watched as Jesper’s father was re-chained and pulled away, his jaw snapping at his son.

Jesper grunted from his position when he was brought to his feet. He writhed about violently, trying to free himself despite his injuries. “Cate, my love, my sweet, don’t. Please, don’t. We’d all rather die here with you. Let me die here with you.”

Once upon a time, I would have granted that wish for him. I would have been selfish – I would have let them die in my place. But not anymore.

“I’ll be alright – I have lived a very selfish life. This is one thing I can do for you all. Just take care of one another.” I managed a shaky smile as I gulped down the thick poison when Willen shoved it down my throat.

“Let me go! Cate, fucking hell, my love – spit it out! You must spit it out! I can’t lose you; I won’t lose you!” Jesper’s desperate cries echoed around the room.

“You will go to the depths of hell where you belong, Cate,” Willen snarled as he let go of me, his job done. He believed he had avenged a woman that thought very little of him.

“I love you, darling,” I whispered to Jesper as I stared at him, the two men struggling to stop him from escaping their hold. His roars of anger were the last things I heard. I smiled weakly for him before my throat began to burn, as my body flopped into a set of arms, and everything became dark.

Chapter Thirty



My hands ran down a plain white dress that cinched at the waist. It flowed around me, and I stared at the grass between my toes.

I'd never felt so free as I did at that moment. My mind was completely blank.

But I had no concept of where I was. My toes curled in the blades of grass, and I took in a deep breath of fresh air.

The sky was a beautiful light blue, with only a few wispy clouds in sight.

I looked up when my name was called from the distance. "Cate!"

As I stared down at the bottom of a hill, a woman waved her arms at me.

At first, I could not make out any of her features. She wore a similar dress to my own, her smile brighter than the sun in the sky.

Slowly, I began to take in her eyes, the way her face was shaped, as well as the way she mirrored me in so many ways.

"Catania..." I muttered, my feet already beginning to move, and I ran down the hill. The wind blew against my skin, eliciting goosebumps all over me despite the warm weather. The yellow flowers blew in the breeze, and when I was in range, I threw my arms around the woman.

She caught me easily, returning the tight squeeze. Her light laughter joined my sobs.

The two of us stayed like that for some time – as if time weren't a thing. It may not be. I was dead... wasn't I?

Any resentment I had for the woman vanished long ago.

“My Cate, what are you doing here with me, hm? I did not think I would see you for some time.”

“I’m sorry, Catania. I’m so sorry...” I sobbed into her shoulder, her hand brushing up and down my back slowly. The comfort her presence brought me was something only Jesper and Eriel had ever managed to achieve.

It was strange to be held by someone who had never done it when she was alive. Despite being close, we would never show much physical affection, especially not when she started to believe what her parents filled her head with. They would have been furious to see us so close to one another.

“You have nothing to apologise to me for, Cate.” Catania slowly pulled back, her hands holding my shoulders. I met her gaze and saw the cheerful smile on her face, the way her skin glowed. She had never looked this radiant before.

She’d always been so sickly and ashen.

Not deterred by my hiccups that followed, she continued to speak, “It is I who owes you an apology. I should never have said those things to you that day – the one thing I regret in my life is hurting you like that.”

“What about what happened to your parents? I had them–”

“I know all that has come to pass.” Catania shook her head. “You did what you had to do to protect yourself and the kingdom.”

I held onto her tightly. “I didn’t do it for the kingdom – I did for myself.”

Catania giggled, her hand brushing against my cheek. “That’s what you think? Oh, Cate, you did it because you knew it was right. Deep down.” She tapped her finger against my chest, over my heart. “Now, you have to wake up.”

“Wake up?” I asked, looking around. It felt so real, the smell of flowers overpowering, making the inside of my nose itch.

“For your Jesper.” Catania smiled, her voice soft, and it sounded as though it were travelling on the wind, enveloping me. “He must be incredibly worried about you. That man loves you more than anyone in the world – I can feel it.”

“Jesper...” I whispered, “My Jesper... I don’t deserve him. I don’t deserve any of it. This was meant to be your life, Catania.”

Saying her name sent a shudder through my body. There was nothing beyond the green grass, the flowers, and the sky. I began to realise that this place was not real – that none of it was real.

Catania spoke softly again, “I gave my life to you – so you had better live it well, you silly girl. No matter what anyone tells you, you are my sister. My dearest little sister, who will make me proud by living her life to the fullest. Do not let what I did that day weigh on you any longer.”

The firmness of her voice was enough to have my shoulders relaxing. “Really?”

“Really, Cate.” I felt her hands on my face, her thumbs brushing over my cheeks. My eyes fluttered closed at her soft touch, almost as though a feather were stroking my skin. “Now, wake up. Wake up and make me proud. Wake up and live your life.”

When I opened my eyes again, I was met with gold.

Chapter Thirty-One



“My Jesper...” I whispered hoarsely.

“Thank the goddesses.” It was a distant voice, and I felt a hand on either shoulder, pulling me up onto a plump pillow. Jesper stared down at me, and my fingers reached out to grip his white sleeve.

“Is this real?” I asked, running my tongue over my cracked lips. His golden stare followed the movement. I sounded croaky; my throat was dry.

“Yes, my sweet. Very real. How do you feel?” Jesper ran his hand over my head, and I gratefully took a gulp of water when the person on my other side put a goblet to my lips. I let my eyes travel in their direction, shocked to see Jesper’s mother there.

No one explained to me why she was, so I leaned into Jesper’s touch as I spoke, “I’m alright – what happened? Where are we? How long have I been out?”

“You don’t remember anything?” Eriel asked, and I noticed that two people were sitting at the end of the bed. It was him and Riddel. When I shook my head, he ran a hand through his hair. “After you took the poison, Jesper killed Siwel.”

I glanced to the man I loved, beginning to take in the mark under his eye. It had settled lower down on his cheek, but it was not as red and angry as it had been before. It had curled into a messy looking twelve, and I found myself amazed that he had not killed more.

His pale skin had a few wounds that were beginning to heal over, and I let out a sigh of relief that it had not been worse. Not after his arrow injury.

“You killed him?” I questioned. I knew he was probably pleased to be rid of a man that had tormented him for years.

Jesper’s lips broke into a wicked smile. “He had it coming. He squealed like the pig that he was.”

I glanced at his mother, but her face showed no emotion on the matter.

“Josephite and Olliea are locked away safely and await your ruling on what we should do with them,” Eriel informed me.

It pleased me that I could have some part in their punishment. “I see, well, they can rot in a cell for a while before I decide. What happened after Siwel was killed?”

“It broke out into a full fight, but someone was working from the inside and helped us,” Riddel continued the story. I noticed Arka was at the side of the bed, his large head resting on the covers. My hand left Jesper and I let it brush through his fur, the animal relaxing under my touch.

I recalled the masked demon that I’d fought against in the den. “Was it a really tall woman?”

Riddel nodded. “Yes – with red eyes. She took a few vials for whoever she is working for. With her help and a few others, we brought the place down in your name. Every liquid they were using was destroyed, aside from the cure. The prisoners they held there are being cared for here. Lord Halle is overseeing it all.”

That may have been why the woman did not kill me. We were on the same side.

Jesper spoke when he saw I was still confused, “Eriel knew you would be alright, so he brought you to Lord Halle’s estate. A physician saw to you as soon as you arrived, and you have been recovering for a couple of days.”

“How did you know I would be alright? I swallowed poison, Eriel. That stuff is meant to kill.” I raised an eyebrow, not missing the way his lips twitched as he tried not to smile. He was still a little bruised himself, but I was satisfied when I saw that there would be no scars.

“Do you doubt our friendship, Cat? I thought something like this might happen – especially after what happened to Posy.” His dark eyes flickered to Riddel, before going back to me. “I’ve been giving you belladonna

every time you have a drink. You became immune to the poison that my brother had been using.”

“That’s why it all tasted strange. I thought I just hated wine more than I thought.” I rolled my eyes at myself for not having picked up on it before. “What did the demon lady say as her reasoning for being there?”

“So many questions when you should be resting,” Jesper mumbled playfully, but he gave me a gentle squeeze.

Eriel interrupted before I could give Jesper a scolding. “She claimed to be from Lower Dalvesta. From what we know, the royal family has no jurisdiction there, and they are run by a religious group – known as the Tower Priests. We know very little about them, but we are trying to find out information. There’s a chance they are in need of the cure for themselves, or they might distribute it there once they assess the ingredients used.”

“Is the south known for demons?” Jesper asked. I was always pleased when he knew when something was important.

“From what we know, it is,” Riddel nodded, “but more research is needed.”

“The way she said it, well, it didn’t ring true, to me,” Eriel admitted, shaking his head as he frowned.

I raised an eyebrow. “You think she may come from somewhere else?”

“The Fourth Kingdom is always a threat – perhaps she was working for them.”

“That’s a good point. They may need the cure too.” Riddel nodded her agreement.

“What about those who were having their blood extracted from them?” I asked, the memories slowly returning to me.

“We think they were being used in the mutations, but we do not know in which ones yet. They could have been for the cure or for the others – but with more tests, we will be able to find it out.”

We fell into silence. I found myself with more unanswered questions, and although they could have waited, I didn’t want them cramming up my mind. “What happened to Willen?” I asked warily. I could see Eriel’s gaze fall, and he looked at his hands self-consciously.

“They are all being kept locked away, Majesty,” Jesper’s mother spoke.

Jesper had still said nothing else, his hand continuing to brush over my head while he stayed at my side, his chest brushing my arm. He was

practically lounging beside me on the bed, and I realised just how big it was at that moment as he took up far more of it than I did.

The room I'd been placed in was larger than my one in Henvale Castle. Narim must have been very accommodating. It was a dusty pink colour, and the bed was fit for royalty. There was not much I could make out considering my crowded beside.

The question I wanted to ask had been eating away at me. Jesper's mother calmly brushed my cheek with a damp cloth, as though it were completely normal.

"What are you... doing here?" I eventually said, noting that Jesper did not seem as put out by her presence as he had any other time we'd spoken of her.

"My mother has revealed quite a bit to us these past few days while you were recovering," Jesper replied, his hand brushing against my cheek fondly. "Including how she was working for Elizabetia."

"We're close friends, actually." Elizabetia kicked off from her place by the window, dressed in her red garments, similar to the costume I had worn for my party. "Grew up together, didn't we, Sal?"

"Sal?" I asked, confused.

"My real name – Salacia," the woman replied. Her blonde hair was curled up on her head, clipped with silver hair pins. Jesper took after her in terms of his sharp facial features.

"We were reunited just after Jesper was born," Elizabetia explained. "She helped me give birth to you, Maj–"

I shook my hand in her direction, despite my aching fingers. They were wrapped up carefully, I noticed. "Please, you can call me Cat," I told her. I would rather that than be called by my true name. The only person I could allow to say *that* was Jesper.

Perhaps it was the oath he had made to me, but it only felt right from him. The only other person was dead.

Elizabetia's eyes widened, but she nodded slowly, a joyful glint in her eyes. Such a simple thing made her happy, and I would strive to make others feel the same if I could. I realised how terrible I'd been over the years – how I had allowed my selfishness and trauma to eat me alive.

If I had been a decent friend, I would have seen through Willen's betrayal. But from the faces around my bed, I was grateful to realise that we had not lost anyone else because of him.

“As you wish, Cat. Well, Sal married Siwel when we first discovered he might have something to do with the mutations,” Elizabetia explained.

“He used to work for my father, you see. Your grandfather, Jesper. Siwel became power hungry and wanted to take my father’s findings further.” Sal dabbed my forehead with a wet cloth, and I found it was a needed sensation, cooling my face down in the hot room. It was probably so stuffy since so many people were in there.

“You mean the initial mutations? Like the ones on my father?” Jesper asked curiously, and Sal nodded to confirm his words.

“They knew they could mutate demons to have different features, like your mark. Siwel wanted to expand on that – to make an army of his own. The initial proposal would be to create an army of demons to face The Fourth Kingdom. That was why he went to the royal family originally, but they said no.” Sal’s eyes were sad as she looked over at her son. Years of hatred from him had probably weighed on her. I think Jesper knew this too, as he reached across to hold her wrist.

There was clearly a conversation I had missed, but I was glad the two had made amends.

“That’s why my parents were attacked?” I asked.

The woman nodded and let Jesper take over her job of patting my face with the wet cloth.

“I believe so. When I married Siwel, I did so to feed information to Elizabetia. My marriage to him was merely for business purposes. He had links to my family, and I was able to keep an eye on his plans,” Sal clarified.

I nodded slowly before my eyes widened as I recalled our meeting before. “Why were you in the maze?”

Jesper tapped my nose with the cloth, and I scrunched it up. “Cute,” he mumbled with a grin. Our eyes met for a moment, and I forgot all about hearing my answer.

Sal cleared her throat, and my eyes flickered away from him, my heart thumping in my chest. “I needed to speak to Jesper. I intended to reveal my involvement in the entire thing, but I was sent away – and rightfully so, Majesty. From what you knew of me at the time, I cannot blame you.”

“All is forgiven. It is me that should be apologising to you for my flippant behaviour,” I said without hesitation. I meant the words too. If Jesper was willing to forgive her after all these years, then so was I.

Sal's smile was small as she shook her head. "No need, Majesty. I understand why you would dislike me – especially after how I treated my own son."

Jesper squeezed my hand at that, having slid his hand down to encase mine after he finished dabbing at my face. "You were just defending my honour, Kitty Cat. Right?"

"Hm, something like that," I teased and turned to look at those who were sitting on the edge of the bed. "What happened with the cure? Have some people taken it?"

"The vial that we found was the cure, thankfully – Kalline was the first one to take it," Riddel answered, and she gave my ankle a pat over the covers. "Before you ask, since I know you can't help yourself, she's completely fine. We're not sure how safe it is to take, but every mutated demon that has tried it has been alright so far. Even Jesper's father."

"He will make a full recovery, Majesty. Although it may take some time," Sal finished for her, a shy smile on her lips. Perhaps the two would reunite... after all, Salacia was free again.

"I am pleased to hear it. Have you taken it, Jesper?" I asked.

He looked a little sheepish. "Not yet. I have been with you the entire time. A couple more days without a cure in me won't make a difference. As for why they made it, Serena has been concentrating on the documents left in the manor with Lord Halle. They say they should have an answer soon."

"Serena is well, too. She is preparing to return to Wertheria to continue her research from there," Eriel added, twisting one of his rings around on his finger. His words were softly spoken, and I realised how conflicted he must be. He did not want to hold the woman back from returning to her home.

"You should tell her before she goes, Eriel. About how you feel – don't let her slip through your fingers," I told him, shaking my head.

"I can't, my place is here at your side."

Usually, I would have waited for a moment alone, but there was no way I was letting him give it all up again. "No, Eriel, not anymore. In fact, go now. I don't want you here unless it is with the loveliest emissary on your arm." I kicked my foot in his direction until it was pushing his behind off the bed.

Eriel's eyes widened, and he huffed when I kicked him. "Cat–"

“No, no arguments.” I shook my head, smiling when Riddel stood up too, urging him towards the door on my behalf.

“Cat is right. Besides, we all saw the way the two of you looked at one another on that hill.” Riddel smirked, and she opened the door for him. “Now, out you go before Her Majesty tells you it’s an order.”

Eriel looked over at the bed, and I gave him a thumbs up, winking. “Go get her, Eriel.”

“You’re stunning Eriel, she’d be a fool to say no.” Jesper turned, and I caught him winking at the man. “If she does, you should come find me, big boy.”

Despite the ache in my body, I placed my hand over his mouth and pulled him backwards so that his head was on my chest.

The room was filled with noisy laughter, the sound filling me with warmth. Jesper did not put up a fight as I held him, and it was nice to have his body pressed to mine.

Eriel ducked out of the room, his shoulders shaking as he chuckled. I let go of Jesper when I felt him press a kiss to my fingers.

“We’ll leave the two of you. I’m sure Jesperin can manage to answer any of your questions. I am glad to see you recovering, Majesty.” Sal smiled, linking arms when Elizabetia offered hers to the woman.

Riddel held the door open for the retreating figures before she gave a teasing salute to the two of us. “Remember, she’s still weak, Jesper,” she teased, whistling for Arka, who dutifully followed her before she pulled the door closed.

There was no time to ask anything else, however.

“Finally, I thought they’d never go.” Jesper groaned, and his large hands cupped my face immediately, his lips pressing passionately to mine.

I melted into his kiss, my fingers gripping the front of his shirt, and I kissed him back with just as much emotion.

His tongue easily parted my lips, and I felt myself becoming consumed by him, our bodies melding together until I was pressed back against the pillows.

Jesper moved his arms to either side of my head and kept his weight off me. His citrus scent enveloped me, and I found my body relaxed immediately, my fingers brushing up until I could run them through his soft hair. Aside from a few marks on his face, he did not look injured.

“Now, I need you to repeat the words you said the other day,” he muttered playfully against my lips.

“Which ones, you know I don’t remember what happened, don’t you?” I teased softly. I knew what he wanted to hear, and after the strange dream, I was beginning to feel more comfortable with my commitment to him.

His fingers moved, and I yelped as he pinched my cheek, my eyes narrowing at him. Jesper smirked, proud of himself. His silver bangs fell in front of his face, and I reached up to brush them away as I had always wanted to.

“I love you, Jesper.” I laughed softly, pressing my lips to his a couple of times. My fingers stroked the ends of his hair, brushing the nape of his neck. I could feel him smile against my mouth as I did.

“Say it again,” he whispered.

“I love you, I love you, I love you,” I muttered back to him, his hand brushing over my head as his body pressed against mine gently.

Jesper pulled back, kissing my lips once. “I love you.” He kissed my nose. “I love you.” Then my cheeks. “I love you.” Then my forehead. “I love you.” His lips lingered there, and I felt the heat spread throughout my body. “I would do anything for you, Cate. I give you all of me.”

“Oh, darling...” I closed my eyes as he brushed his nose against mine, opening them to see the flecks of orange in his eyes and the way his pupils dilated. “I’m sorry it took me so long to realise my feelings. You made me that oath so early on... how did you...?”

“How did I know?” Jesper asked with a beautiful smile, one that tugged every heartstring. I would give him anything he asked for when he looked at me like that. “I believe in love at first sight, Kitty Cat.”

“You’re silly—”

“I am being honest. I knew I loved you that moment we spoke in the ballroom. Do you know that I never intended to form an alliance with the Queen of Crimone? In fact...” his hand brushed down my side over the black silk covers. “I intended to see if I could take the throne out of your pretty little hands.”

I knew I was meant to be angry by that confession. But his honesty, and every time he had proved himself before, only made me chuckle. “I must be stunning to have changed your mind.”

“Now, now, don’t get too big for your crown, Kitty Cat. You’re just my type,” Jesper teased, fluttering his eyelashes.

I laughed, knocking our noses once again. “Perhaps we can have that wedding you were so desperate for – so you will be able to share the crown you wanted to steal.”

Jesper’s eyebrows rose. He turned so he could lay on his side beside me, one knee up and his arm wrapped around my middle.

“I am not asking you to. My plan changed the moment I laid eyes on you.” He shook his head and brushed his hand against my side. “Every plan led to you. To being with you. Even if you did not want me as a husband, I would stay at your side as a protector.”

“The oath?” I whispered.

Jesper nodded, leaning to press a kiss to my cheek, lingering there. “Exactly. I linked myself to you.”

“So, you don’t want to marry me?” I teased, turning my head to press my lips to his once more. He tasted of a mint and strong wine – something I had come to notice often about him.

Jesper tugged me closer to his chest. “I would never say no to a proposal, Kitty Cat. Especially not one from you.”

His eyes sparkled with mischief, and I laughed at his words, my hand stroking over his chest until I brushed something in his inner pocket. Surprised, I slipped my hand within. I glanced inside, with his gaze on me, spying the vial that meant so much to him.

“You must take the cure...” I whispered; my fingers wrapped around the bottle in his overcoat. I raised my hand, so it was level with our faces. “I’ll be here with you the entire time, darling.”

“I’d hope so, considering all the times I have risked my life for you and how I just nursed you back to health myself.” He laughed but took the stopper out of the bottle with some trepidation.

I watched him stare at the dark blue liquid, my hand brushing up to his bicep. “What’s stopping you?”

“I’ve lived with this mutation my entire life... waited for this moment,” Jesper muttered, swirling the liquid around. “I just thought it would be much different.”

“The moment or the liquid?” I asked, settling my cheek against the pillow as I observed.

“Both, I suppose. I thought it would be a much more torturous process to take it – but it’s so simple,” Jesper replied, bringing the bottle up to his

lips. He took a shaky breath in, and I watched his throat bob as he gulped the entire thing down.

He wiped his mouth with the back of his sleeve and moved to lay his head on my chest, my fingers instantly resuming their place in his hair. I could see the orange hints mix with the red when we were so close, his hot breath tickling my skin through my rosy coloured cotton nightgown.

“How do you feel?” I asked him after some time passed.

Jesper chuckled, and he nuzzled his head against me more. “No different from before. I don’t think I have anything to worry about now. So, let’s talk about something else. When shall we have our wedding?” he asked me.

“Hm... How about a month from now? I want a lavish affair with all eyes on us,” I told him.

Jesper hummed, and I felt his arm wrap further around me, his hand under the covers and pressed against my back.

How he was comfortable, I didn’t know, but he wanted to be as close as possible.

“I like the idea of everyone getting to see you profess your love for me.” He grunted when I tugged at his hair. “And when I profess my love for you too, I suppose.”

“That’s what I thought you said,” I joked, lightly kissing the top of his head.

Jesper chuckled against my chest. “We will be arguing with one another for a lifetime, won’t we, Kitty Cat?”

I found I could not hide my smile. “And I cannot wait, darling.”

Chapter Thirty-Two



I placed some pink roses by the headstone and picked up the ones that had begun to wilt. Placing the dying flowers in my basket, I straightened up and stared at the name that had been carved into the stone.

Posy Accora.

Arka whimpered beside me, his snout brushing my hand. I raised it to stroke through his fur again, as I found solace in the action. He'd taken to following me around the last month, mainly when he was tired of Jesper. I was a softer touch and often gave him treats. Jesper was sterner – which was a surprise to many when they found out.

"I miss you, Posy," I whispered sadly as I thought of the girl's charming smile and her sincerity in everything she did.

A hand squeezed my shoulder, and I looked up at Riddel. The woman's mouth was set into a thin line. Her usually painted lips were bare, and she wore her hair in a tight ponytail – which kept it from her face and made her appear stern.

I brushed my free hand against my leather trousers, straightening my silver overcoat. Riddel was dressed similarly, the fashion at court beginning to lean towards trousers and ornate coats for women.

“Will you allow me to escort you back to the castle, Cat?” Riddel asked, raising her arm so I could link mine through hers.

I placed my hand on her arm, my engagement ring shining on my finger as I glanced down at it. Jesper had insisted on picking one out and had settled on a golden ring with a round citrine in the centre. Flowers encased it and I found myself reminded of his eyes every time I saw it.

“Were you visiting too?” I asked Riddel.

Riddel nodded slowly as we walked through the royal graveyard together. “I always do on a Friday,” she explained. “I miss her greatly.”

Her honesty caught me off guard, but I was flattered she felt she could confide in me. “She really liked you, Riddel. But she would have wanted for you to move on and be happy,” I told her, finding my throat constricted even at the thought of Posy.

Riddel chuckled quietly. “She would also want you to stop blaming yourself for what happened, Cat. She would be over the moon to know you had placed her so highly that she now rests with your ancestors.”

They weren’t really mine. Mine rested somewhere else in Crimone, as well as in Wertheria. My false parents had taken the antidote but needed to be under watch – due to the fact they were still the only known humans that had been bitten.

Jesper and I had set up Demorai Island as a place where people could go to rehabilitate after the mutations. The place was thriving under a new council after Jesper gave it back to the people.

He was not such a terrible man after all. Not that I ever truly thought him so.

My intrusive thoughts had disappeared since my brush with death – no longer acknowledging the negative comments to make me doubt myself. I thought that perhaps I’d been hearing Catania in the comments – but that vanished after her final message to me.

It had been decided, in my new council, that my parents’ illness should still be kept a secret from the public. They would likely never recover completely, and it would be best to keep them away from the throne.

A part of me would never forgive them for what they had done to me either. The nights I’d spent locked away from the world, hidden from everyone. Their attitude towards me – their intention to keep me out of the family until they needed me.

Knowing they were alive was enough. I had done my duty to them.

“I had her buried here so that she could be close to you. Her parents readily agreed... I am not so sure they valued her as much as the two of us did.” I sighed, shielding my eyes from the sun.

We were in no rush to get anywhere, the two of us conversing quietly in the warm weather. We were at the start of the summer months.

“Have you written to your family in Wertheria?” Riddel questioned.

“I have exchanged a few letters with both my brother and sister. They seem pleasant enough. It appears they both knew of my existence before I knew of theirs.” I chuckled. “At least it made it easy to explain.”

We followed the path towards the gate, but I stopped at the end of the row. I plucked the last rose from my basket and stepped towards the grave, placing it down. The grave was not marked since the king and queen had not allowed it to be when they were sane. Instead, there was a newly engraved quote.

“I have lived a full life.”

“Your sister?” Riddel enquired when I returned to her side after a moment of brushing my hand across the headstone.

I nodded. “When I was poisoned, I saw her in a dream,” I admitted. Jesper was the only one I’d spoken to about what had happened. It felt good to speak to a friend. To someone else I could rely on.

“Posy visits me in my dreams some nights too. They are there to calm us, I think. To reassure us,” Riddel answered. “In Dalvesta, where I was born, our Goddess says that dreams are what the dead give us when they pass.”

“But what if you do not get a dream?” I frowned. “And what if you have a dream before you lose someone?”

Riddel laughed, throwing her head back. “Exactly. It’s a load of religious whisperings that they fill children’s heads with. Dreams are whatever we make them, aren’t they? You must interpret them for yourself.”

“Do you want to know something?” I asked. When she nodded, I continued, “Jesper once said you were a credit to your name – a riddle – and I think he is completely right.”

“Don’t let him hear you say that, or we’ll both never hear the end of it.” Riddel smirked, leading the way. Arka bounded ahead of us when he

caught sight of Jesper and Eriel talking at the castle gates, and I smiled.

“What took you so long? You and I have an appointment, Kitty Cat,” Jesper commented, opening the gate when he spotted us. Before I could reply, he wrapped an arm around my waist to pull me against his side, kissing the side of my face.

Eriel groaned. “Oh, please. I’d like to keep my breakfast in my body.”

“Stop being such a spoil sport, Eri. I’m just giving my future wife a kiss,” Jesper protested, giving my hip a gentle squeeze. “Besides, Riddy doesn’t have any complaints, do you?”

“I’d rather gouge my eyes out than see that again,” Riddel added, shoving Jesper playfully in the arm.

Jesper pouted, leaning down to press a kiss beneath my ear. “They are ganging up on me, my sweet. You should defend me.”

I laughed, and turned my face to him, pressing a brief kiss to his lips. “I can’t. For you see, I am going to be too busy kissing my future husband.”

“They’re both as bad as each other,” Eriel said, sighing. “I need a new job. I don’t get paid enough for this.”

“Could you take me with you?” Riddel teased, the two of them continuing to complain to one another.

“You look beautiful today, Kitty Cat. I like this look on you,” Jesper teased as he brushed his finger down my nose before tapping it.

I raised an eyebrow. “What look do you mean?”

“Happiness, my sweet.”

“Oh.”

Jesper pressed a kiss to my lips – softer than usual, but no less meaningful. I cupped his face in my hands, a grin forming on my lips.

My life was finally beginning to be worth living.



“Oh, Jesper!”

“I do love when you cry out my name like that, Kitty Cat.”

I rolled my eyes, glancing around the canvas to look at my fiancée. “Stop moving otherwise I’ll never be able to finish this painting.”

As I had promised, I’d attempted to teach Jesper how to paint. I’d had high hopes, but as soon as I watched him paint the most horrific stick person, I realised I would have my work cut out for me.

When all my attempts to help him failed, I decided I would use him as my model instead.

I’d organised for all royal responsibilities to be put on hold for an hour or two so that we could retreat to the old chapel. Jesper had argued about having to sit still for so long and I should have known that he would cause trouble.

Jesper had opted for a regal look – dressed in a white ensemble, golden chains and buttons for decoration. A velvet blue cloak was draped around his shoulders, and he wore his hair down, a pearl earring dangling from one ear.

I swiped some yellow paint onto his eyes, trying to get the perfect shade of gold. I wanted it to perfect – since I’d decided to give it to him as a wedding present.

He twirled his cane around between his hands and I sighed in exasperation. “Jesper, seriously, one more movement and I’ll throw this brush at you.”

“But I need to itch a scratch,” Jesper complained. “Can I move quickly?”

“Fine, be quick.”

My eyes widened when he appeared beside me. "What do you think you're doing?"

"Itching a scratch."

"What sort of scratch?"

"You never said I had to specify before," Jesper teased, and he moved to drag my stool back. The scraping sound made me wince, but I had no time to dwell on what his intentions were.

I couldn't help but smile as he cupped my neck, pressing his lips to mine hungrily. I moaned into his mouth at the sudden intensity but responded with just as much enthusiasm.

He pulled away briefly, and I tucked a piece of hair behind his ear, my fingers stroking over his soft cheek.

"Better?" I asked him, playfully.

"No, not even close." My fiancé shook his head and pressed his lips to mine again, his fingers working on the lacing of my dress to make it loose.

"Jesper, I'll never get it finished in time for the wedding if you keep this up," I muttered against his mouth, running my hand down his chest.

"Just give it to me after. I'd much rather be doing something else with my precious time," Jesper replied hotly, his teeth tugging on my bottom lip. I gasped, allowing him to push his tongue into my mouth.

I heard his cane clatter to the ground and felt his hands move to my waist, lifting me so he could take my seat on the stool.

He placed me on his knee, his hands slipping beneath my simple cream coloured gown.

I knew I would never grow bored of his touch, nor of his kisses.

"Someone might come and look for us. I have a dress fitting with Kalline soon," I told him as I felt his hands drift up to my hips to slip into my under garments. His hands were always desperate to find bare skin and he let out a satisfied sigh as he found it.

"The they'll get quite the show, won't they?" Jesper smirked and he removed the undergarments from me by ripping them clean off.

"Jesper!" I hissed.

"What, my sweet? They were in my way."

"Yes, but I can't walk around without any on."

"When I'm done with you, you won't be able to do much walking."

"Not this again, you always say that," I retorted, my hands working on undoing his buttons, releasing him from his coat.

“I am a man of habit, my sweet,” Jesper laughed and he rubbed his hands slowly over my thighs. He pressed me down onto his leg, a shot of pleasure running through me as I repeated the action myself.

One of his hands moved to finish unlacing my dress, pulling the material from my shoulders and down until he could reach for my corset. “So many layers that keep me from touching you. I hate it.”

“Says the man who is still more clothed than me.” I tutted and finished tugging off the ties of his shirt to pull it from him. His hands left me briefly to allow the action before he returned them to their previous positions.

His fingers ghosted down my chest as he undid my corset, before dropping it onto the floor with the rest of our clothes.

As if he was starving, his mouth attached to my chest – biting and sucking the skin to leave marks that would not be seen when I was fully clothed.

My fingers tangled in his hair as I sucked my lip between my teeth, my other hand slowly moving between us to start undoing his trousers.

His hand stopped mine and he pushed it away. Breaking away from me, he moved my body with ease so I would be draped over his lap on my stomach, my feet not touching the floor.

“Darling, what are you doing?” I asked, shocked.

“Tell me, my love, you seem to have painted my fingers completely wrong. Did you forget how long they were?” he teased, brushing them over my folds after he pulled my skirts completely off.

Cool air blew over me and I shuddered. “Maybe...” I muttered, catching onto what he meant. “You will have to remind me.”

“Oh, I intend to, my sweet.” He pushed two fingers deep into me, my breath catching as he curled them expertly.

He was watching me. I could tell. Heat rushed to my cheeks as he said, “You’re so wet for me already, Kitty Cat.”

“Jesper...” I warned but could not deny that I liked his teasing. He knew what it did to me.

His fingers curled again, and I moaned, gripping onto his leg tightly. I let out a yelp of surprise as his other hand landed on my behind, a stinging sensation following the slap. He repeated it and I bit down on my lip hard.

“Do you like that? It sounds like you do.” Jesper added a third finger, and I felt my toes curl, my slippers clattering to the ground as I kicked my

legs a little.

He started to be rough with his movements and I tried not to writhe too much, but it became difficult as my body pooled with desire.

“I-I think I remember now,” I got out, mischievously.

“Are you sure?” he teased, and I moaned loudly as he fastened his fingers, his thumb brushing to rub my bud.

I could feel my release building and I dug my nails into his leg.

“Aren’t you so good at taking my fingers, what a good girl.” Jesper’s sultry words only spurred my release forward and I rocked my hips back against his thrusting fingers. “Getting desperate, my sweet?”

“Yes,” I bit out.

“Well, we can’t have that, now, can we?” I could hear his smirk, his thumb pressing harder on my bud and he continued to curl his fingers expertly.

Soon enough my release washed over me, and I cried out, my thighs keeping his hand in place.

“I have no intention of removing them until you are satisfied, my sweet,” he chuckled darkly, wiggling his fingers as if to make his point and I groaned.

After he was convinced I was calm again, he removed his fingers, and let me go. I shifted to the floor on my knees, catching my breath.

To my surprise, he tapped his fingers against my lips.

“Suck on them, filthy girl. You’re the one that made them dirty,” he growled and shoved his fingers between my lips. I did as he asked, sucking them clean and swirling my tongue around them.

“That’s it,” he encouraged, his voice husky. I could already see his hardness confined in his trousers.

His stare remained intense, and I released his fingers, only to have them replaced with his tongue. I nearly fell back as he kissed me so greedily.

Jesper moved us with ease, pressing my body into him with one hand while the other moved our clothes around. He spread his velvet cloak over the stone floor, and I found my hips pressed against my folded skirts when he lowered me.

He broke away to run his hand over our clothes, fishing into his coat to pull out the familiar vial. We both took it, as we usually did, and his lips briefly touched mine again.

“On your stomach,” Jesper ordered, and I slowly did as he asked, which gained me a smack on the behind. “Faster than that, Kitty Cat.”

“Yes, Captain,” I answered suggestively with a small laugh, my front pressing to the ground.

He groaned in appreciation, and I felt him press up against me after his legs moved on either side of mine. His hands brushed over my sides, and I relaxed. “You’re testing me on purpose, aren’t you? You know I go harder when you do.”

“I’m not admitting to anything,” I bit down on my lip as I felt his length stroke over my folds.

Jesper chuckled low and with a thrust that took my breath away, he buried himself deep inside of me. “Fine. I’ll fuck a confession out of you then,” he grunted.

My fingers gripped onto the cloak as he was true to his word – his thrusts filling me each time.

His hand moved to press my face down against the stone and I moaned at the rough act. “You had better not stop,” I whimpered, the words muffled. “I’ll kill you if you do.”

“I know you will.” Jesper merely chuckled, his hand moving beneath my body, and I felt him rub my bud. His other hand squeezed my sore behind and I groaned against the ground.

Already sensitive, I came faster than I ever had before, my body reacting to every touch.

Jesper wasn’t finished, though, and he wordlessly moved my body up to press my back to his chest.

“Still thinking about killing me?” he asked, catching my chin in his hand as he tugged my face to his so he could plant a searing kiss on my lips. “Only because I’d rather like to attend our wedding.”

“...I suppose I’ve changed my mind,” I muttered against his mouth, whimpering softly as he started to move his length again, reminding me that he was still settled inside of me.

“That’s my girl.” Jesper grinned dangerously, before he moved his lips down my neck, leaving his marks once more.

I reached behind to tangle my fingers in his soft hair, tugging on it when he bit down hard, crying out. His tongue soothed the mark, and it was followed by his thrusts deepening once more.

His large hand stroked across my stomach, and I reached my other hand to squeeze his firm behind, smiling as he growled against my skin.

“I would spend all my time like this if I could. Buried so deep inside of you that I forget everything else around us,” Jesper spoke lustily, his fingers moving down to rub again.

“I don’t have any complaints to that,” I teased, moaning as he moved his other hand up to my neck. He slipped two fingers into my mouth, tilting my head. I felt him inhale against my neck and I could feel his laboured breathing as he got close to his own release.

“You feel incredible, my love,” he growled against me, and a muffled cry of his name left my lips as I reached my third release.

He jolted in me, and we both came down from our highs together. He was always gentle after sex, his fingers bushing over my skin as we lay together, catching our breaths.

“Hm, I am better at this kind of art,” he teased, brushing his fingers over a particularly dark spot below my right nipple. I breathed in sharply.

“Well, it’s certainly an improvement from the stick men,” I teased him, squealing when he pinched my nipple in jest.

“Cruel, cruel, woman.” He tutted, pressing his lips to my cheek, before he nestled his head against my neck. His hair tickled my nose as I pressed my lips to the top of his head.

All other commitments in the day were forgotten in that moment.

“I can’t wait to marry you, my love,” Jesper whispered against my neck, pressing his lips to a ticklish spot, which made me laugh.

“I’m glad to hear it. Considering I share your sentiment, my darling,” I told him, kissing his forehead as he lifted his head to look at me.

I thought he might say something else romantic. But instead, a wicked smirk formed on his face, as he pushed my legs apart.

Jesper pressed lingering kisses down my body, before he settled between my legs, his face dangerously close to my core. His warm hands hooked around my thighs, and he winked when I sat up on my elbows to watch him.

“Let’s call off all other obligations for today. I intend to have my fiancée squirming in pleasure for me all afternoon,” he teased, before his sinful mouth descended on me again and again.

Epilogue



“You look exquisite, Cat.” Eriel cupped his own face in his hands as he stared at me, tears welling in his dark brown eyes. The man was dressed in a red overcoat, with white garments beneath. He was still neat, aside from his wild curls that would never behave.

“How many times are you going to say that, Eriel?” I teased as I pulled his hands from his face and tried to guide him in the dance. “Have you had a few too many drinks?”

Eriel shook his head quickly, but I couldn’t help but laugh as his eyes glazed over. He squeezed my hands in his with a grin. His words were slightly slurred, “I am c-celebrating, My Queen. C-Celebrating you finally finding the happiness you deserve.”

“You are too kind, friend.” I smiled, twirling him under my arm, snorting in amusement when he stepped on the hem of my wedding gown. “Kalline is going to kill you for that.”

Eriel grimaced at first, his hands sliding up my arms to hold my shoulders. He steadied himself there. “I’m not scared of her—”

“Is that so, Count?” Kalline twirled past us on the marble dance floor, Serena in her arms. The short emissary could not help but snigger as she stopped beside us.

Eriel let go of me instantly and wrapped his arm around Serena. “You must protect me from her,” he whispered loudly into her ear. Serena was

sent into a fit of giggles by her tipsy fiancée. I smiled as I saw the ruby ring sparkle on her ring finger as she patted his chest.

“You’ll need a lot more than your beautiful future wife to protect you from my wrath, Eriel.” Kalline pointed her finger at him, then at my gown. “That dress took all of my attention for weeks.”

“And what a beautiful gown it is, Kalline. You look lovely in it, Cat,” Serena complimented with a beautiful smile; her cheeks becoming slightly red from the attention of her fiancé.

It had not come as a surprise for anyone when Eriel proposed to the diplomat. He offered to return to Wertheria with her so that she might put her position first. I’d been disappointed to lose my dearest friend, but I could not keep him by my side forever.

“Thank you. Have you thought any more of my proposal, Serena?” I asked, my fingers brushing over the shimmering top layer of my skirts.

“Always doing business, even when you’re meant to be celebrating your wedding.” Serena laughed but bowed her head respectfully. “I have – and I would be honoured to accept.”

“What are you accepting?” Eriel asked, his eyes not leaving the woman tucked against his side. The two certainly made an attractive couple.

“She is accepting my offer to be a part of my new council, Eriel,” I answered, linking my arm through Kalline’s when she offered it to escort me off the dance floor. The dancing couples circled around as the four of us moved to the side. “My siblings wrote to suggest it, in fact.”

“King Valentine is sad to let me go, but he has blessed our marriage,” Serena said, as she leaned closer to Eriel. “And the princess has promised to travel for the wedding in a couple of months.”

I would meet my sister for the first time at the wedding. It was something I felt nervous about, but it filled me with excitement too.

“Well, that is a shock...” Eriel got out, but his shoulders relaxed. Even in his tipsy state, he could make sense of the situation. “We get to stay here after all.”

“Even more time for me to be able to tease you, Eri,” Jesper’s melodic voice interrupted us, a drink in one hand and his other buried in Arka’s fur, stroking him. “Now, would everyone be able to spare my gorgeous wife so that I can spend some time with her?” he teased, golden eyes flickering to mine.

“Of course, *Highness*,” Kalline answered playfully.

She moved from my side to join Riddel, who was close by looking after our distinguished guests – the children running around her skirts and trying to catch one another.

Alisna and Jakob looked much stronger than the first time we'd met them. The family they'd been placed with had cared for them well – allowing them to thrive.

I spotted Jesper's Aunt Lorelai beside them, having taken a shine to the children, offering them a place in her academy if they so desired. Arka bounded off to join them, the children giggling as the tame wolf rolled onto his back so they could stroke him.

"Silly animal," I heard Riddel mutter fondly.

"Are you talking about the wolf or his master?" I teased.

"Speaking of the tamed beast..." Riddel answered with a grin, and I felt a hand circle around my wrist.

"Hello, Kitty Cat," Jesper whispered against my ear as he twirled me into his arms, back on the dance floor. Our chests were nearly pressed together by our proximity, and I chuckled against his cheek.

"Hello, darling," I replied softly, and watched him straighten. I stared up at the man I had married only hours ago.

"Is it too soon to slip away and ravish you?" Jesper teased, and I found myself laughing.

"Far too soon. We still have many dances to take part in," I reminded him.

His groan was muffled as he leaned to press a fervent kiss against my lips, his teeth scraping my bottom lip. I pouted for a moment when he pulled away, disappointed at the kiss' brevity.

Jesper winked, and I realised that nothing would escape his notice. "Later, my sweet. I'm going to have fun worshipping my wife's body."

"Hm, we'll have to see if you live up to my expectations – otherwise, I might have our marriage papers torn up." I smirked, despite the heat rising to my cheeks, but I gasped as his hand slipped to squeeze my behind subtly over my gown.

"Careful, Queenie. Otherwise, I'll have to find a nice dark corner to have you in before we even make it up to our chambers," Jesper growled against my ear, his teeth tugging at the lobe, before he pulled back to rest our foreheads against one another.

I let out a breathless laugh, the image running through my mind. “Alright, darling, I’ll behave...for now.”

I ran my hand over his shoulder as we danced, appreciating the blue velvet of his cloak which made a nice contrast to the charcoal clothes he wore beneath, decorated with gilded chains and buttons. The blue matched the underlayer of my dress, where the ivory parted.

Opting for something more traditional, I had chosen to incorporate the royal colours of Crimone into the ivory long-sleeved gown. The sleeves had another sheer layer to them – it was of golden glitter that matched my ring.

Jesper insisted on wearing an audacious outfit, but I had managed to argue him around to a military coat. The coat had golden accents throughout, just as the skirts of my dress did.

Where his glowed, mine sparkled.

But, the most beautiful part of all, was the porcelain corset Kalline made for me to go over the incredible gown. She had painted it to resemble the moon and the stars of the Nightfallow family, and despite feeling that it was a little lost on me, the beautiful design left no room for argument.

“Your goddesses have blessed our union,” Jesper commented, after a moment of twirling me around.

The ballroom was lit up with chandeliers, the crystals gleaming and lighting up the entire room. The sun was setting outside the large windows, the sky a mix of purples, pinks, and reds. The marble floor helped us to glide in our dance, his warm hand pressed against my lower back, his other gripping mine tightly.

“How can you be so sure? Considering you do not believe in them yourself,” I asked him with a grin.

Jesper tutted playfully, and I followed the movement as his tongue darted out of his mouth as he bit it. A gesture of thought. “They have made it a splendid day, have they not? The sun is shining, the people celebrating, the harvest for this year was announced to be flourishing...”

I glanced to where our mothers were in conversation, the two of them with linked arms. They had both been adorned in beautiful gowns for the occasion, made of the finest silks Kalline could find. And thankfully, there was not one gaudy wig or bow in sight on them.

Captain Utara was always remained close by, keeping a watchful gaze on Salacia. Jesper had informed me a few days before the wedding that his parents intended to sail to the island together, so his father could finish his treatment for the mutation there.

“We were both able to have our mothers here with us today,” he added as he followed my gaze, his sharp features highlighted by the glitter on his cheek, the light doing it justice. “And I am lucky enough to have my father too.”

“Yes, we have both been blessed today.” I stared at the side of his face as I turned back, rising onto the tips of my toes to press a kiss to his smooth jaw. “Perhaps all this good luck it is a gift from my sister,” I whispered. “From Catania.”

Our ceremony had been a quiet affair, filled with those who knew my secret. We both wanted the marriage to be legal and so I married him with my true name – as Cate Murcla. The ceremony had been held in my workspace, the chapel, surrounded by the art I loved so much.

Then we had held a blessing, for show, since we both wanted something grand. People from far and wide had come to visit us. From the poor to the rich, everyone in Crimone had been invited too.

“I think it is a wonderful gift for her to give us – I like that idea more,” Jesper replied, and his lips brushed below my ear.

As we twirled by the window, I realised we were shrouded in the golden sunset, and I felt lighter than I ever had before.

“Maybe I’m wrong, though,” I spoke after a moment of thought. “I can’t be right about everything, after all.”

Jesper smirked. “Weren’t you wrong about everything that has come to pass?”

I rolled my eyes fondly at his words. “I did get one thing right.”

“What was that?” Jesper asked with a devious smile, his lips brushing against mine as he held me close to his chest.

I grinned. “That I love you, Jesperin Utara.”

His gaze softened. “And I love you, *my sweet Cate.*”



Dearest Sister,

I wish I could be writing under better circumstances, but this is information you should be aware of.

The crown's cousins, the Silverens of Dalvesta, are at war – as you well know. They hope to claim back the land they are losing to the unknown rebel that has revolted against the royal family. The kingdom has been split in two. The rebel leader rules Lower Dalvesta as something called a High Prince.

I received word from the youngest cousin, Princess Romilly. She revealed some information that has changed my plans for Crimone, and I ask for you to appeal to our brother to change his for Wertheria.

According to the princess, there is magic involved. Magic that has only existed in the old myths. I do not know what to make of her words, but I do not think the girl would joke under such circumstances. Magic has become something of interest to me in recent times and we should not take it lightly. Magic is more real and present than we might have been taught.

She fears that the rebel comes from The Fourth Kingdom – and that he may be undefeatable. I ask that you search your academy for any scriptures that might talk of the old myths. The threat from The Fourth Kingdom becomes more real every day.

If what she says is true, we must prepare ourselves for a war of our own. It would also be wise to ready your army. We do not know how far this rebel intends to go and if our kingdoms are safe.

Continuing with the bad news, a prisoner has escaped from the cells here. Willen Swan must be caught at all costs, and I pray that you and Valentine will be able to aid me in this.

Sending you my love,

Cate

P.S. We must meet soon. I have news of a more cheerful nature to share.

Acknowledgements

Is it really that time again? I'm still in shock that I even got this far.

Firstly, I should apologise to my family. They are certainly not my intended target audience for this book, so I hope it has not horrified you too much. One day I'll write a story you can read without wanting to avert your eyes. Despite this, I am grateful for your support with everything I do.

Mum and Dad – thanks for encouraging my love for books and for not telling me off when I would read well into the night as a kid (and as an adult).

I'm proud of Cat and Jesper's story. I hope that the readers hated and understood Cat as much as I did and found Jesper to be insufferable and loveable all at the same time. They're an unconventional couple and it was so fun to follow them throughout.

I actually edited this story while I was on my summer trip in South Korea, and it inspired me to continue with what I was doing. The trip taught me a lot – about myself and about what I wanted to do with my life, while spending it with some of the most amazing people. I know that this story may not be for everyone, but I enjoyed every moment of trying to add in twists and turns that would keep people guessing.

To Emily – for encouraging me to chase my dream of writing, you're incredible and I know that you're going to be successful in whatever you choose you want to do in life.

To Hayley – I'm writing this before you've read it, but I already know you'll give me the best support I could ask for and I just want you to know I love you.

To Maxine who puts up with my crazy ranting about ideas, I love you and thank you for everything – no matter what you decide to do next, you're going to smash it. Also, I hope you liked this story more than the first.

To people who don't necessarily realise they have played a part in my writing – the friends that don't read my work, but support my posts, or even just ask me how I'm doing – I am grateful for everything.

To my beta readers – you’re incredible. I couldn’t have made the story what it is without you. To my editor, and to Mary Moroz for the extraordinary art she made for the chapter headers – your help was invaluable, and I can’t wait to show off the other designs that were made.

I’m still learning – with every book I publish I hope to gain more experience and a better understanding of what makes a good book.

For a taster of what is next to come, check out my Instagram and other pages for updates on ***The Valiant Daughter*** – which follows Princess Romilly and High Prince Mordekai...

Instagram: @authoramyburns_

Other Links: <https://linktr.ee/amyburnsauthor>